

RE-IMAGINING THE BUDDHA

PREFACE

Towards the end of August, 2010, Subhuti and I had a series of discussions centred on the topic of the imagination. I had long wanted to talk to Subhuti on this topic because I had a few new ideas which I wished to communicate. Subhuti managed to make himself available for a few days and we had the discussions in question at my Madhyamaloka flat. Our starting point was the subject of animism, on which I had been reflecting. In fact I reminded Subhuti that many years ago, when I was still living in Kalimpong, I had written a poem with the title 'Animist'. From animism we branched out first to empathy, then to ethics and aesthetics, and finally to the imagination or imaginal faculty. This led us to a quite wide ranging exploration of the spiritual life, including meditation, and faith in, and devotion to, the historical Buddha. Our discussion was not at all systematic, especially as I kept remembering things I wanted to say, and as Subhuti did his best to draw me out on certain points. I am therefore extremely grateful to Subhuti for not just writing up our discussions but for presenting them in a more organised and systematic manner. The title he has given to this article, 'Re-imagining the Buddha', very well encapsulates the overall thrust of our discussion. I very much hope that this article will be a source of inspiration to all Order members and have the effect of clarifying the place of the imagination in the spiritual life.

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Madhyamaloka

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SUBHUTI

I feel it is also important to have this, so to speak, magical element, not just in our lives generally but especially in our spiritual lives. And it is symbol, myth, ritual which help give life this magical element - you might say also imaginative element.

Sangharakshita, European Order Weekend, August 2010

To live the Buddhist life, to become like the Buddha, we must imagine the Buddha. The goal must be embodied in our imaginations, our deepest energies gathered in an image of what we are trying to move towards. Yet, images and imagination are either problematic or unimportant for many today. This is because we live amidst broken images – images that are not merely broken but debased. And the true value and possibility of imagination has largely been lost. This is the present context for the development of Buddhism.¹

In the Western, post-Christian world, the Buddhist today is tangled in a triple complexity of imagination. We stand in a problematic relationship with much of our cultural heritage. We have rejected Christianity and therefore have the difficult and subtle task of reaching behind the doctrinal significance of its ubiquitous images and myths to their raw psychic power. Where such images are expressed in art, we must suspend our emotional responses to the religion they serve and allow whatever beauty they contain to speak directly to our aesthetic sensibilities.²

This is not a simple matter – but it is yet more demanding because of the historical twists and turns of Christianity's own attitude to images, all layered into our cultural assumptions. In establishing itself as the dominant religion in Europe, Christianity suppressed the pagan gods of popular religion, abrogating to itself all thaumaturgic power and consigning all other magic to the devil, sometimes with a ferocity that itself seems demonic. This was a war against evil that lasted well into the seventeenth century and still finds its echo in contemporary rhetoric.

This first breaking of images was succeeded by a second: the Protestant Reformation with its yet more savage and thorough iconoclasm, that in its most extreme forms now condemned almost all imagery to the devil. The Roman Church retained its images intact, but the defence it had to mount introduced a new self-consciousness and sentimentality that was itself a kind of destruction or at least decay. Only in parts of southern Europe and in Latin America does a quasi-pagan imaginative wealth survive.

The Reformation led inexorably to the rise of the rationalism and scientism that have enthroned the material world, leaving the realms of myth and imagination to pathology, politics – or worse: to mere entertainment. This third iconoclasm is now a worldwide influence and is the most destructive global legacy of the colonial and commercial power of the West. Images that once expressed deep meaning are now commonplaces and advertising clichés.³

Of course, Christianity never succeeded in completely colonising all imaginative life: there were alternative traditions. Classical Greece and Rome were the educators of Christian Europe and their gods and nymphs persisted in the minds of the cultivated in uneasy symbiosis with saints and martyrs, alternately justified and reviled. Neoplatonism and Alchemy had a powerful influence on many important thinkers over the centuries. And the old folk gods did live on into the last century in beliefs about Robin Goodfellow and the like. In more recent times, C. G. Jung and the analytical psychologists who followed him have taken the realm of imagination very seriously indeed and made important discoveries about it that can be of great assistance to the Buddhist today.

Despite these alternative traditions, the depth and power of images is not widely appreciated in the West today and what images we have are mostly broken or leached of significance. These are some of the difficulties amidst which the Western Buddhist

must imagine the Buddha. In India the issues are different, although overlapping. Contemporary Indian Buddhists live amidst Buddhist images that have literally been broken, for Buddhist culture was the victim of both the fanatical despoliations of Muslim invaders and the more persistent and systematic extirpations of the Brahminic 'counter-revolution'.⁴ Their gaze back into history leaves them with great pride in their ancient heritage and deep sadness and even anger at the political, social, and cultural processes that have deprived them of it – and that still seek to deny the truth about India's past.

Followers of Dr Ambedkar who have turned to Buddhism to escape their oppressive station in the Hindu caste system have understandably turned away – and turned away with revulsion – from the overwhelming profusion of Hindu imagery, with its 'thirty-three *crore* gods'.⁵ Many educated Dalit Buddhists have taken to a narrow rationalism, with Bertrand Russell as the presiding genius. This rationalism is often fathered on Dr Ambedkar, although he himself was well aware of the power and importance of myth and symbol – indeed we have his outline of an intended book on the subject.⁶

Dr Ambedkar's great contribution to Buddhism is to have connected the Dharma so effectively with social transformation, both in theory and in practice. But among many of his followers the Dharma is lost in the politics and Buddhism is understood merely in terms of the scientism and materialism that is really the product of the post-Christian West. Dr Ambedkar himself was vividly aware of the 'sacred' power and depth of the Dharma – and saw that without that sacred dimension there can be no moral order in society.⁷ His followers now need to free themselves from a shallow rationalism and discover an imaginative life that does not lead them back into Hinduism, which means back into caste and the ignorance and exploitation of superstition.

Even in the old Buddhist world with its unbroken traditions, modernity poses a major challenge that few have yet successfully answered. Everywhere Buddhists face, from different points of view and within different cultural contexts, the question of how to imagine the Buddha today. Organisational and doctrinal questions aside, how is Enlightenment to appear in the imaginations of men and women today?

Sangharakshita founded the Triratna Buddhist Order unconstrained by any particular Buddhist cultural tradition and its members are therefore uniquely placed to rediscover the image of the Buddha. The Order has, both in the West and in India, wrestled with these issues over the last forty years, with varying degrees of self-consciousness and even more variable success. There have been some notable developments in a native Buddhist art: the colossal statue of the standing Buddha at Nagaloka in Nagpur, India, being a recent example, blending as it does Far Eastern and contemporary Indian sensibilities. Often, however, our iconography and ritual, principally in the West, suggest a deviant Tibetan sect – and this potentially creates great difficulties for our work in India, where Tibetan imagery is indistinguishable

from the Hindu variety, and it also greatly limits us in the West, appealing imaginatively to a minority, either attracted to it for its rich exoticism or able to perform the difficult task of separating deep archetypes from the cultural expressions that clothe them.

Dividing my time between both India and the West, I have become more and more aware of the challenge we face. In the first place there is a danger that the imaginative sensibility of people in our movement in the West becomes increasingly out of key with that of our brothers and sisters in India. Given the wide cultural differences, there must inevitably be a considerable difference of imaginative form. Nonetheless, without an underlying unity of imagery it will be increasingly difficult for Indians and Westerners to identify themselves as members of a single spiritual community, with all the opportunities that brings for a sense of shared humanity, beyond cultural difference.

But there is a deeper issue, going to the heart of what it is to lead the Dharma life: unless we can truly imagine the Buddha and his Enlightenment in a way that stirs us deeply we cannot mobilise our energies to Go for Refuge to him. We can only imagine the Buddha wholeheartedly by discovering his image in our *own* minds, inspired and supported by the images around us. Images of this kind cannot be ordered or devised. They must live and grow and, like plants, they must emerge from their own natural environments: the psyches of the individuals in which they appear and the cultures in which those psyches have developed. Broken and debased images cannot easily be exchanged for images from alien cultures, however genuine, powerful, and effective they may be in their own contexts. Buddhists today, especially those from outside the old Buddhist world, have embarked on a long and difficult journey to discover the image of the Buddha within themselves and to allow that image a natural expression in their own cultures. This work is more akin to magic than to science.

Sangharakshita has had quite a bit to say about the broad field of imagination, setting the outlines of a new Buddhist theory of imagination.⁸ It has seemed to me that this needs wider understanding and currency amongst us and a more thorough absorption into the life and practice of the Order and movement. In August this year I therefore had a series of conversations with him on this topic, to see if any new light could be shed. Our conversations were recorded and I have written this article in my own words on the basis of transcripts of those recordings, although I have expanded considerably upon what Sangharakshita said on this and other occasions and given my own interpretation of what I think he meant or implied. Perhaps I could more exactly describe this as a set of variations on themes by Sangharakshita. I have shown what I have written to him and, once more, he confirms that I have accurately represented his thinking – as accurately as is possible in another's words and style.

What emerged from our discussions was a clear confirmation of what he has said many times before, but in certain respects it went much further and deeper.

Sangharakshita once again calls on us to be much more radical, especially in our search for the Buddha's image.

IMAGINATION IN THE DHARMA LIFE

In my article, *Revering and Relying upon the Dharma*, I set out Sangharakshita's thoughts on the nature of Right View. I tried to show how *pratītya-samutpāda* is not a theory about reality but a description of the conditioned relationships that we can observe underlying everything. I did this especially by referring to the five *niyāmas*, which are the categories under which the regularities that govern every aspect of our experience can be understood. Reason can do no more than recognise and investigate these conditioned regularities. The Buddha therefore very actively resisted all attempts to get him to speculate about the origins or purpose of reality and Sangharakshita wants us to follow him in this very rigorously. What lies beyond is mystery – or, better, *the* mystery. The mystery cannot of course be explained conceptually and 'Buddhism has no mania for explanation'. But, the mystery can be explored – indeed, it must be if we are to live the Dharma life. 'Where reason has flown as high as it may', it is the 'illuminated imagination' that 'must take over and continue'.⁹

What then is the imagination? Sangharakshita uses this term and its synonym, the 'imaginal faculty', sometimes capitalised, as key elements in his exploration of what the Dharma life consists in. His invocation of it is inspired especially by his reading of the English Romantic poet and literary critic, S. T. Coleridge, whom he considers arguably England's greatest thinker, although crippled by his inability to think beyond Christianity. The more unequivocal poetics of William Blake has also greatly influenced his vision in this respect.¹⁰

Coleridge was concerned to understand the creative process, of which he had had such powerful experience, and to rescue it from the mechanistic and deterministic psychology then developing. Imagination, to him, could not be captured by such reductive theories and to make this clear he contrasted it with what he called 'fancy'. Fancy is the mere routine assembling of images into new combinations without any deeper significance or real underlying connection. Imagination, however, modifies and gives unity to the images it blends, discovering in them moral and spiritual meaning. Coleridge saw imagination as a vital creative force that expressed itself most characteristically in the artist, but that was '...a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'.¹¹

Coleridge thought as a Christian, albeit a tortured and unconventional one, and his understanding of imagination is mixed up with his beliefs. We can however easily read what he had to say independent of his theology and that gives us a basis for approaching this important aspect of Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma. Shorn of its theistic connotations, we could define imagination as a power or capacity of the individual, having in it something that is more than the individual, that

transforms the objects of experience and unifies them. The four elements of this definition give us the key to how Sangharakshita understands imagination.

It should be understood at the outset that image and imagination are not necessarily confined to the visual or its visionary counterpart. All the senses deliver images, including the less obvious ones, like the kinaesthetic sense or the sense of spatial location, and imagination can deal in subtle feelings that are not easy to convey in sensory terms. Thus one can imagine the Buddha without seeing anything, whether literally or in one's mind's eye.

Imagination is a power or capacity or even faculty of the individual. While this discussion of imagination has begun in the context of artistic creation, imagination is not at all confined to the artist or even to the appreciation of art, although these may be our most familiar and ready sources of illustration. Everyone has that faculty of imagination as a potentiality and it is the essential vehicle of all genuine moral, aesthetic, and spiritual life.

As a potentiality it is intrinsic to the human mind. It does not however actively function in everyone, or at least it does not function as a dominant or controlling force and is not at all conscious. It must be recognised, educated, and cultivated if it is to come into decisive play. The metaphor of faculty teaches us the attitude we need if that cultivation and education are to take place. It is not a matter of constructing something or bringing something into being, but of discovering a capacity we already have, identifying it and giving it importance – just as athletes might develop bodily skills they were born with once they recognise their capacity. We each need to feed the imaginal faculty we already have so it grows in range and vitality and plays an increasingly significant part in our lives.

Every metaphor has a front and a back: it suggests a meaning we want to indicate and yet it connotes, to the unwary or unwilling, significance we do not intend. 'Power', 'capacity', and 'faculty' all suggest a something separate from them that possesses them – in this case, the possessor is 'me'. At the outset, we need to think of imagination as a faculty that is part of us because we have not yet experienced it or recognised it. We have to think of it as there in potential so that we can discover and develop it. But, as imagination begins to flourish more and more freely, it becomes clear that it is not merely a power of the mind that we own, but the mind itself. It is not something we have, but something we are. It is not part of us, but the whole. We are imagination.

There is another significance to the metaphor of a faculty, especially when thought of as analogous to the sense faculties. Imagination has direct access to its objects, in contrast to reason, which deals with concepts derived from experience. It is a means of knowing, its truths being symbolic rather than conceptual. As it matures, imagination becomes the faculty of faculties, combining and transcending reason, emotion, and the senses, whether physical or visionary.

Those who are truly creative know very well that *imagination has in it something that is more than the individual*. One cannot say that the poem or painting or music came from oneself, if it is at all successful; one did not *will* it: the creation seemed to will itself. This is important for us to understand if we wish to develop our imaginations. For the imagination to flower we must suspend our willing and allow something new to arise from beyond our conscious identity. There must be something like what Keats called 'negative capability', a receptive attitude that has us attentive without will or expectation or urge to resolve – no 'mania for explanation'.¹² The inspiration is caught out of the corner of one's eye, not in the sharp focus of a stare. In this sense one is not the author of one's creation but its witness and vehicle.

What is that something supra-personal by which imagination is touched? We need invoke no god or other higher power, but simply refer to the schema of the *niyāmas*. As one acts more and more skilfully one's experience unfolds in more subtle, rich and satisfying ways, in accordance with the *karma niyāma*. One has experiences that go beyond one's previous way of seeing things. These may come gently and gradually or abruptly, even disruptively. Sometimes, perhaps even characteristically, they will appear *other* and one will feel one is in touch with something beyond oneself, even that one is taken over by something from another dimension. In the Dharma these experiences are understood, in the first place, in terms of the schema of the *triloka*: *karma*, *rūpa*, and *arūpa*: they may be experiences coming from the higher reaches of the sense-realm or else belong to the visionary worlds beyond the senses. Such experiences are not directly willed into existence: they arise in dependence on previous *karma* and they will transcend one's normal sense of oneself, appearing even as other than oneself. It is these dimensions that imagination in its lower forms touches.

However, imagination may fly yet higher and may be affected by conditioned processes arising under the heading of the Dharma *niyāma*. These arise once self-attachment is recognised for what it is and begins to be decisively weakened. What then unfolds within us is a series of states, each arising spontaneously out of the preceding and transcending it, beyond even our *karma*-based willing. The experience of imagination may then be the stirrings of those *Dharma niyāma* processes, or at least stirrings of stirrings. When imagination touches these dimensions, Sangharakshita calls it the 'illuminated imagination'.¹³

In more traditional Buddhist terms, the *Dharma niyāma* is first felt distantly in *samyag dṛṣṭi* or Right View, which is not a mere conceptual grasp, but a leap to the inescapable truth of the Dharma in a moment of experience – in a moment of imagination. One could even say that that initial *samyag dṛṣṭi* is the discovery of the imaginal faculty as the vehicle for the Dharma life – as is suggested by the word '*dṛṣṭi*', 'seeing'. Once one enters the stream of the Dharma, imagination becomes the major character of one's awareness, and it grows more and more dominant as one progresses. One increasingly *becomes* imagination and acts in harmony with

universal forces that are more than personal. In a phrase, imagination is the faculty of self-transcendence.

Those who are authentic artists have access certainly to the *karmic* level of imagination and the greatest may perhaps touch on *Dharma niyāma* experience. Though they have access to imagination at these levels, they are often unable to remain at those heights. This famously leads many to exhibit a double character, both as godlike surveyors of higher truth and as all too fallible human beings – they have temporary access to a dimension that they cannot dwell in and that is at odds, even at war, with their ordinary character. Coleridge himself was an outstanding and tragic example of the artist's dual nature.

Imagination transforms the objects of experience; fancy, by contrast, merely rearranges them into new patterns without altering their fundamental character as objects. The world is seen by fancy as but an arena for bodily survival and enjoyment, and it perceives mechanically, simply taking the data of our experience and arranging it for the avoidance of pain and gaining of pleasure. By means of imagination, however, we pass beyond that animal-like existence. In imagination the data is spontaneously selected, organised, and transformed in ways that draw out its inner meaning or expresses a fundamental truth beyond conceptual understanding. The image, experienced through whatsoever sensory medium, transcends the data from which it springs. Through the image, our intimations of deeper meaning are given a form by which we ourselves can come to know them. The components of the image are transformed into a symbol of something far beyond their value to us as mere intelligent animals.

Symbols are characteristic creations of the imagination, combining imaginative form with deep meaning, beyond concepts. A symbol can be contrasted with a sign, the product of fancy, which is a kind of shorthand for a conceptual label or piece of information: for instance, an arrow on a road-sign shows the way to go. Though a symbol does communicate meaning, that meaning cannot be fully captured by any particular form of words, unless those words themselves become symbolic. Imagination in its fullness, when it becomes illumined, transforms all experience into symbol, embodying the deepest significance in all things.

It should be noted, of course, that we are speaking of the imagination transforming the image, the subject transforming the object, yet this is not always how one experiences it. It may often seem more that it is the image or symbol itself that transforms the one who experiences it. Experiencer and experienced, subject and object, imagination and image come into far closer interaction, transcending our usual categories of perception. This has sometimes been described as 'inter-subjectivity': the other is experienced not as an object but as another experiencing subject, the same as oneself – in other words, one sees them more 'objectively', as they really are.

Imagination unifies the objects of experience. Experience can be unified in either a

quantitative or a qualitative sense. The mere act of perception unifies all objects of experience quantitatively by attributing them to a single field known by a single observer. Further, within that single field and single observer, parts or aspects can be picked out as having some common characteristic and therefore belonging together: the arms, legs and head are all interpreted as parts of a single body. Unification here, one might say, is logical: it follows the 'laws of thought'.¹⁴

Imagination unifies qualitatively. It unifies experience, or those aspects of experience it selects, objectively by discovering in them a unifying meaning that is expressed by their combination and transformation - it unifies by transforming them into symbols. Such qualitative unification is not subject to the laws of logic: symbols can mean many things, even contradictory ones, at the same time – an image of an old man might, in a dream, signify time's inexorable decay and, at the same time, deep and abiding wisdom.

Imagination also unifies the subject – or better *is* the unification of the subject. As imagination emerges, it draws together and transcends the faculties of the mind as they ordinarily function within us, so they cease to appear in our lives as conflicting, even irreconcilable, perspectives. It integrates the cognitive, emotional, and volitional with a subtle and refined sensation in a single harmonious act of awareness. Such experience brings a deepening satisfaction and pleasure, a feeling of harmony and sympathy, even of love. This unification is what is implied by the Pali and Sanskrit word *samādhi*, which connotes the same integration of the mind's powers. Indeed, for many seriously practising Buddhists, meditative absorption will be their readiest experience of imagination.

From these qualities of imagination, another follows: ***imagination is dynamic and 'ascending'***. The images that imagination feeds upon stand between the ordinary world of sense form and the highest realms of transcendental meaning. Imagination is the intermediary, bringing down to us intimations of truths beyond us and carrying us up towards them. The 'ascent' of imagination is through a hierarchy of progressively more subtle and fulfilling encounters with imaginative meaning. In the Buddha's own teaching, this hierarchy of ascent is explored in terms of the three *lokas*, each with its sub-categories of heavenly worlds. The higher reaches of the *kāmaloka* yield aesthetic sensations of exquisite subtlety and one resonates deeply with the life in all things around one. In the *rūpaloka* one dwells in a dimension of visionary experience, not necessarily mediated by the visual faculty, full of symbolic resonance. Beyond that, in the *arūpaloka*, one plunges into the depths of consciousness, resting in fundamental qualities that defy language.

At every level, the experience is more and more complete, combining – unifying – all aspects of awareness yet more harmoniously. In particular, there is a deepening aesthetic pleasure at the same time as an intensifying revelation of the true meaning of things: a powerful sense of satisfaction, that is both aesthetic and cognitive. These experiences are however mundane, in the sense that they must be sustained by *karmic*

effort, since they lack *prajñā*, transcendental insight. Imagination at this level therefore waxes and wanes with the karmic forces that sustain it. Only illumined imagination is constant, and that arises once imagination decisively integrates with the ultimate truth of things. Imagination then becomes the faculty of *prajñā*, whilst previously it had been the medium of *śraddhā*. In the final flowering of imagination, there is only imagination and all that is seen is the image of truth. This is perhaps represented in Mahayana Buddhism by the Jina Vairochana, the Illuminator, who has the *dharmadhātujñāna*, the wisdom that perceives the Dharma in all things.

To complete this exploration of Sangharakshita's understanding of imagination, we must examine one more matter: ***the ontology of the imagination***. Imagination is how we perceive and what we become when we let go of a merely mechanical perception and allow our experience to be invested with symbolic meaning. We then inhabit a world of significant images, some of which are directly derived from our physical senses, while others appear as intuitions, dreams, or visions, or as artists' creations.

In most cultures until the modern era, many such images are personifications, especially of gods and spirits. Of course, as commonly represented they are often not truly creations of imagination at all, but merely signs, the mechanical reproductions of fancy. Nonetheless, usually behind the representations is some genuine imaginative experience. Such figures are found in early Buddhism, which took over ancient Indian cosmology and pantheon and 'converted' it. From this background, Mahayana Buddhism revealed a whole rich world filled with archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. But do these gods and spirits and these Buddhas and Bodhisattvas really exist as conscious beings, independent of our perceiving them? What is their existential status? What is the ontology of imagination?

Sangharakshita argues that the question is too literal, itself begging many questions: not least, what does one mean by 'exist'? Often such questioning is based on the materialist assumption that there is but a world of matter, with consciousness as a mere side-effect: either something is there as a measurable, material fact or it is not. The materialist dismisses the world of imagination almost as thoroughly as did Mr Gradgrind and demands, 'Facts, facts, facts'. If that world is dealt with at all in such an outlook, it is in the context of pathology or entertainment – or propaganda. But the imagination defies the logic of either 'is' or 'is not'. Imagination knows no law of excluded middle: *A* can both be and not be. The Bodhisattvas and the gods exist independent of us – and they do not.

Before we descend irrevocably into a metaphysical quagmire, let us put the matter more straightforwardly. The visionary Bodhisattvas and gods probably do not exist in any material sense: they cannot be photographed, weighed, and measured, for instance, nor can they be contacted by telephone. But they do embody something deep in reality that is more akin to consciousness than to matter. Sangharakshita invokes a term he came across in recent Japanese philosophy that communicates the ontological character of these images: 'non-ontic existence'.¹⁵

Usually when we say that something does not exist we assume that it is therefore not important: what is important is what materially exists. However, moral values and spiritual truths have no material existence as such yet they are supremely significant – indeed, they are far more significant for us as human beings than any particular material object. They exist in this non-ontic sense. We should take symbols and other images of the imagination very seriously indeed on their own terms – arguably we should take them more seriously than we take the material world. This is the case even when, perhaps especially when, those symbols present themselves as conscious beings independent of us.

The issue requires some closer examination still. To explain how we should view these images, Sangharakshita invokes a largely forgotten German Philosopher of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hans Vaihinger, who wrote a once-influential book, *The Philosophy of 'As If'*.¹⁶ Vaihinger follows through the implications of the philosophies of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, and indeed of Berkeley and Hume, accepting that we have no *direct* access to a reality external to us. What we perceive as a world of objects standing in causal relation to each other is a 'representational construction' – Schopenhauer's *Vorstellung*. We think of our experience *as if* there were real objects that causally affect each other, distributed in space around us. We do so because it works for practical purposes, even though it is an interpretation or construction that cannot do full justice to the reality of experience.

Vaihinger called this interpretation 'fiction' – although he did not mean what we usually understand by the word, an untrue story, but rather a story that gets as close to the truth as possible under particular circumstances for particular purposes. Usually we take this construction for reality itself, but we need not. Implicitly we should say to ourselves, 'This mysterious and indefinable experience is not really a table out there, but I will think of it *as if* it were one', and we think of it as if it were one because it is then useful when we need something to put a book on (saying which, of course, involves more interpretations).

The gods and spirits, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas exist in this 'as if' sense – which actually is no different ontologically from what present themselves to us as material objects, in the sense that we may interpret them 'as if' they were conscious entities, independent of us, because that works under certain circumstances, for certain purposes. We see them that way because it is the best interpretation we can find of mysterious and indefinable experiences. From this point of view, the validity of an 'as if' interpretation is its effectiveness.¹⁷

But effectiveness itself must be defined by the ends that are served. For the purposes of physical survival and enjoyment, accepting an external world of causally related objects is effective on most occasions – as it is for leading the Dharma life while one has a human body. When we look for broader ends for our existence, accepting those

personified archetypes of imagination as if they were consciousnesses independent of our own is effective from the moral and spiritual point of view, because it enables us to enter the world of imagination and ascend through its hierarchies to the full and final meaning of things.

All this is fully consistent with the Buddha's teaching. The Dharma does not deal in existence and non-existence as absolute categories: indeed, the Buddha explicitly rejected these, saying that, in the forms of eternalism and nihilism, they lead to grave moral and spiritual problems. He speaks instead of becoming and passing away. The key distinctions are epistemological, between ignorance and wisdom, and ethical, between skilful and unskilful, not ontological, between existence and non-existence. All things whatsoever are to be seen as impermanent and empty of substantial essence, and all mundane things are to be recognised as incapable of providing full and lasting happiness. This is the understanding to be cultivated in relation to any experience, no matter of what kind. The attitude that accompanies that understanding and creates the basis for its cultivation is one of *maitrī* towards all living things and *śraddhā* towards whatever embodies the Dharma.

To summarise: when we encounter any experience, we need not preoccupy ourselves with its metaphysical reality, with whether or not there *really* is a consciousness out there, independent of us. We try to see it as a conditioned arising and we approach it in an emotionally positive spirit, seeking to make good use of it for the true welfare of ourselves and of others. If that experience embodies the Dharma to any extent then we take it very seriously indeed and respond to it with faith and allow it to influence and inspire us. When we encounter images of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas we accept them in this spirit.

Whilst owing inspiration to the English Romantics, especially Coleridge and William Blake, Sangharakshita invests the term 'imagination' with firmly Dharmic significance, as the vehicle of the Dharma life, the faculty by which we come to know the truth of things – come to know it and, as it were, become it. We could speak of what Sangharakshita has said on this topic as developing a new Buddhist theory of imagination. But it should be clear that 'imagination' does not translate any particular Buddhist term, although several basic Buddhist concepts could be included under its heading. The need for such a term arises because of the special circumstances of the contemporary world in which the significance, even the reality, of that faculty has largely been lost because of the growth of materialism, with its glorification of the physical senses. This necessitates the identification of a different way of knowing.

That need simply did not arise before in Buddhist history because the faculty was taken for granted as a cultural and personal reality. In this area, as with his emphasis on friendship, Sangharakshita is exploring values that traditional societies have simply assumed without comment but that require special identification today because of the particular cultural circumstances in which they have been largely devalued or even lost. Fortunately, there lie to hand within Western cultures the

traditions, tools, and terms readily adaptable to Buddhist use.

If a Buddhist reference for imagination was required, a ready correlation could be made with the five *cakkhus/cakṣus* or eyes of both the Pali commentaries and the Mahayana, each with its own slightly different list. The basic idea is that there is a hierarchy of eyes: the 'fleshly' eye is the lowest, followed by the 'divine' eye of psychic power, then the 'Dharma' eye that sees things as they truly are, and beyond successive eyes of supreme realisation, variously described. Each of these eyes must be opened sequentially, each arising out of the preceding. The faculty of imagination operating on successively higher levels corresponds to all the eyes above the fleshly one – although 'eye' should be taken to include other sense faculties. In Sangharakshita's usage, those from the Dharma eye upwards comprise the scope of 'illuminated imagination'.

Invoking the notion of imagination calls up a larger conception of awareness as the stuff of Dharmic development - so often treated as if it was just our ordinary everyday consciousness that required a little sharpening. It is a much richer and fuller awareness, with far greater possibilities of enjoyment, understanding, and empathy. At the same time it is a definite possibility present within our experience now: from time to time, it will fly us beyond ourselves, in however limited and imperfect a manner. This highly appealing potentiality of our experience is immediately accessible to us. If we want to develop imagination further we simply need to keep working at the karmas that are the conditions in dependence on which it flourishes: summed up in the old triad, *śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*. But before we can develop imagination, we must recognise it within us as of central importance and give it the space to flourish.

This is one of Sangharakshita's most important messages, a teaching that enables us to understand better what is entailed in developing a Buddhist movement that is relevant to the situation all over the world today. Where the conceptual truths of the Dharma are concerned, we need to go back to what the Buddha himself taught, so far as we can know it, and apply it in our own situations, taking inspiration and guidance from later traditions. But where the culture and images of the Dharma are concerned, we must set out into the unknown on a journey of discovery. We need to discover what the Buddha looks like *to us*. We need to find the Buddha in our own imaginations and to allow his image to express itself in forms that we can respond to with every aspect of our being – with our imaginations, ultimately with our illuminated imaginations. This is not a simple or quick task. Like any voyage of discovery, its destination is unknown and the period of travel uncertain. But it must be done if we ourselves are to live the Dharma life and if we are to plant the Dharma in the heart of the world today.

In my conversations with Sangharakshita on these topics, the theme of discovery and of developing a sensitivity we already have in potential arose again and again. We found ourselves especially concerned with discovering an imaginative sensitivity in

three areas: empathy for life; response to the beautiful; and connecting with the image of the Buddha. The remainder of this paper will be concerned with Sangharakshita's thought in these three areas. It should be kept in mind throughout that, in discussing imagination, necessarily I will be calling upon the philosophy of 'as if'.

IMAGINATION AS EMPATHY

In *Living with Awareness*, Sangharakshita remarks, 'I would go so far as to say that a universe conceived of as dead cannot be a universe in which one stands any chance of attaining Enlightenment'.¹⁸ This intriguing statement seems of a piece with what he has said elsewhere about the need for a revival of paganism if Buddhism is truly to take root in the West. What does this mean?

One first remembers that, according to the Suttas, the Buddha lived on familiar terms with all kinds of non-human beings. There are a few stories of his sympathetic relations with animals, like the great tusker who, when once he was living alone in the forest, 'kept the spot where the Exalted One was staying free from grass, and with his trunk brought water for the use of the Exalted One'.¹⁹ He is shown entering into communication with various earth spirits who haunted shrines in lonely places. And he appears to have been on familiar terms with various sky-gods, such as Sakka, the king of the gods, who acts towards him with the deepest respect.²⁰ And he has access, at will, to the successively more subtle divine realms beyond that, each with its own angelic beings. His, indeed, is a richly animated world and he is presented as fully aware of it all and sympathetic to it.

Must the contemporary Buddhist rediscover the world as animate in this sense? Should we start making offerings to the ancient Indian gods or should we revive the *genii locorum* of wherever we happen to live – Woden in England, Llew Llaw Gyffes in Wales...? Are English Buddhists, for instance, to become Neo-pagans, gathering at Stonehenge on Midsummer's dawn for ritual revels? It seems this is not at all what Sangharakshita means. The ancient gods and spirits of Europe are as alien to us now as are the rich theophanies of the East. We have lost our connection with them – and to be ignored is death to the gods, or at least to any particular manifestation of them. In any case, we do not – or rather most of us do not – see the world in that way any more.

What Sangharakshita is asserting is that we must rediscover the capacity directly to sense life in the world around us, even to empathise with it: a faculty that our ancestors had and that we too have innately, but that today we usually lose as we leave childhood, especially in a culture dominated by materialist assumptions. Pagans and animists, both of the past and in many cultures to this day, see every feature of their landscape as inhabited by gods and spirits to whom serious attention must be paid if one is to have a successful life. This capacity has been lost to many today. For the first time in world history, so far as we know, a widespread and increasingly dominant culture has developed in which the world is perceived by many as

essentially dead and the animistic imagination is not widely valued – and is even scorned. No doubt much that was foolish and false has been cleared away by the European Enlightenment, which with the Protestant Reformation dealt the old animist sensibility a decisive blow, and many are now free from the exploitation and social control for which such superstition was commonly manipulated. However, a depth of connection with the living world has been widely lost and we are now the poorer for it.

In Western culture in modern times something of that capacity has survived among educated people principally in art, especially poetry, for many poets have been deeply concerned about this issue. The English Romantics were explicitly protesting against the growing materialism of their age, with its rationalising of human experience, by invoking a vivid sense of nature as alive. Sangharakshita himself seems to have retained this awareness throughout his life, expressed especially in his poetry. He communicates something of our contemporary predicament in an early poem written in Kalimpong in 1952:

ANIMIST

I feel like going on my knees
To this old mountain and these trees.
Three or four thousand years ago
I could have worshipped them, I know.
But if one did so in this age
They'd lock him in a padded cage.
We've made the world look mean and small
And lost the wonder of it all.²¹

It is important for us to rediscover this capacity for empathy with the life around us because it is the true basis of ethics. Whilst reflection on the nature of karma may induce us to repress our unskilful tendencies out of self-interest, this is only the beginning of ethics, helping us to gain the space and sensitivity for a more genuine and natural moral sense to emerge. For instance, we might decide to stop eating meat because we are aware of the karmic consequences for us in the future. Once we have been vegetarians for some time, we will become more sensitised and thereby recognise that a sheep or cow or pig is alive as one is oneself alive and will therefore feel empathy for them – and could not easily harm them, far less have them killed to eat. One could say that the karmic consequence of not eating meat for reasons of rational self-interest is that one develops real empathy for the living beings one formerly ate.

Ethics is really to do with feeling solidarity with all life, a direct recognition of the same life in the beings around one that one knows in oneself. This is essentially an imaginative act, something more than a kind of reasoned reflection – although of course thoughtful reflection may be a means of awakening that empathy. Imaginative

empathy is direct and immediate, and may be completely intuitive, without thought, one might almost say, instinctive. One simply resonates with the life in another person or animal, just as a vase on a mantelpiece resonates sympathetically when a particular note is played on the piano.

For the sake of completeness we should acknowledge that even this is not the ultimate ethics. There is a path that leads from ethics as self-interested discipline on the basis of a recognition of the force of karma, to ethics as empathy based on the natural resonance of life for life, to ethics in its final sense as the spontaneous outpouring of compassion arising in the mind of one who has transcended self-clinging. The ethics of self-interested discipline leads, under the power of karma, to the development of a mind that naturally empathises more and more fully: the ethics of empathy overflows in selfless compassion, which is in a sense beyond ethics, for it requires no discipline or restraint, but acts spontaneously for the greatest benefit of all.

Sangharakshita says that, if we are to act ethically, we must *rediscover* this natural empathy for life that we had, at least in germinal form, in childhood (albeit then often accompanied by the tendency to act at times with great insensitivity). The metaphor of rediscovery implies that our effort is not one of willing something new into being, but of attending to our experience more closely to see what is already there. If we pay close attention we will find that we are already sensitive to the life around us. It is as if all the time life communicates directly with life at a level below our normal attention – like a background hum to which one has become accustomed and fails to notice any more. We are most likely to recognise this sensitivity, for instance, when immersed deep in a forest or jungle. If we are receptive to what is going on we may pick up what can be described as a vibration, a kind of emanation from the life in the midst of which we are plunged. To feel ourselves thus enfolded by the life around us can be a deeply soothing and refreshing experience.

The ethics of empathy is not limited to a response to animals or other living organisms. A fully empathic awareness responds to the living quality in all things, even in stones or metals, in storms and in stars. This is not a question of the pathetic fallacy – sentimentally attributing human characteristics to nature, though that would be far better than seeing it as mere dead matter. It becomes difficult to find language adequate to describe what one feels here, but we can sense something like life vibrating even in inorganic matter or natural events.²² If one has this kind of sensitivity it will affect the way one interacts with the world around one, making one cautious about destroying or even altering the environment unnecessarily.

This empathic mindfulness perhaps needs far greater recognition and development. If one is not more deeply sensitive in this sense it will be less easy to have a natural ethical response to other humans – one's ethics will lack something of this deeper empathy. Of course it is very difficult to feel the life in nature when living in the midst of a great city, in which the natural world has been held at bay – albeit

overflowing with other humans. The whole trend of life today towards technologically mediated experience in the artificial environment of a city alienates us further and further from the natural world and therefore from our innate empathy with it.

Alienation from nature is counterbalanced in recent times by the growing movement of environmental awareness and action. The most common motivation here is the recognition that we are fouling our own nest and endangering thereby the lives of future generations. In other words rational self-interest is the motive: recognition of the *vipāka* of our own karma. But, there are those who are also motivated by a deeper sense of identity with the natural world we are endangering: theirs is the ethics of empathy. One of the possible beneficial outcomes of the environmental crisis, should we survive it, is a far more widely shared awareness of and sympathy with the life by which we are surrounded. Nature does not exist merely for man's enjoyment and he was not given 'dominion' over it to use it for his own benefit. The natural world is alive, full of life that resonates with our own lives and is valuable as life. The more widely that is experienced the more likely we are to see out the present century.

There is another way in which empathy with the natural world manifests itself: in the fascination of the sciences. For quite a number of people today the sciences are not so much about mere factual knowledge but about imagination. The wonder of nature's profusion and variety, the humbling vastness of space and time, all awaken in some a strong response that carries them beyond the narrowly personal. It is often remarked that many astronauts have returned from their extra-terrestrial journeys reporting a kind of religious experience on looking back at our planet floating amidst the stars. On seeing how small and contingent is our little life one is awakened to a sense of the glorious mystery that surrounds us. That mystery can never finally be penetrated, but must be approached with awe and gratitude. Art and science here converge.

We find ourselves in such different cultural circumstances to any that we know of in the past that it is difficult to say what form a re-sensitising to the natural world will take. As more and more Buddhists do recover a much deeper imaginative empathy, will they re-people trees and mountains as their ancestors did? Or will some new, as yet unimaginable, manner of embodying that sensitivity emerge? If Buddhism does truly take root again, imaginative empathy will necessarily deepen within the Sangha and perhaps more widely too. The rediscovery of this faculty will then certainly be expressed in a new Buddhist culture. Yet by definition we cannot know now what that will be like or even predict its direction, except to say that it must emerge. It will only do so, however, on the basis of our own imaginative development now – our own rediscovery of the world around us as alive.

There are a few loose ends to be tied, linking the theme of imaginative empathy with other themes already well-discussed elsewhere. First, we can recognise the connection with *metta* or loving-kindness, which is the active dimension of empathy. When we feel that imaginative identity with living things we will wish them well and

will want to act in ways that do not harm them and that are beneficial for them. This becomes more specific and runs deeper when two people are conscious of that natural empathy for each other, share various interests and values, and have the time and opportunity to get to know each other: they will become friends. That natural resonance of life for life will draw them together more and more closely.²³

Empathy is also the basis of compassion. When we become aware that others are suffering, our natural empathic response is to wish for that suffering to be removed and to feel the urge to do so ourselves. If we are genuinely imaginatively responsive we will not be able to ignore the distress around us and will do what we can to help. From this aspect of imagination flow all kinds of compassionate activity – activity that is integral to a genuine Buddhist life. Among other things this will mean working with others to create a better society, based on the principles of the Dharma.

Finally, a Sangha, such as is the Triratna Buddhist Order, rests upon that natural empathy. Empathy is its basis and the guarantee of its future. Imaginative empathy is a vibration of like with like and the more alike the more strong and subtle the empathy. Members of a Sangha are identified on many different levels: they are parts of a single reality; they share life itself; they have a common humanity; and they are committed in the same way to the same ideals – they Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels. More completely still, they will be united to the extent that they have a direct experience of the Dharma working within them. The Sangha is only truly a Sangha when each member is aware of every other with that imaginative empathy in this fullest and deepest sense.

RESPONDING TO BEAUTY

'The great instrument of moral good is the imagination', says the Romantic poet, Shelley.²⁴ He goes on to argue that a function of art, and of poetry in particular, is to work upon and perfect that instrument, the imagination, so that it becomes capable of yet greater good. This connection between art and the moral and spiritual life has preoccupied Sangharakshita throughout his career. For a while it even threw up something of a problem for him. After going forth as a wandering mendicant at the age of twenty-one, he experienced a conflict between art and spiritual life rather than a connection. It appeared to him that his dedication to poetry and his commitment to the Dharma were incompatible and that he must give up the one for the other. Resolution came slowly in his mid-twenties, especially through his experience leading tutorial classes in English literature for students from the Young Men's Buddhist Association that he had set up in Kalimpong, in North India. He found that, as he explained the significance of Shelley's *The Cloud*, he was explaining Dharma. It became clear that the greatest poetry touches the depths of human experience and there begins to meet the Buddha's teaching.

This recognition that Dharma and art have an important area of coincidence led him to write a number of essays, exploring '...the fact that Religion and Art are in essence

one, and that Beauty is not merely Truth, but Goodness as well.¹²⁵ The central work in this series is *The Religion of Art*, written in 1953 but unpublished for 20 years. For such a seminal piece it is still all too little known and studied. This is very regrettable because in it is set out what is perhaps one of the most important of Sangharakshita's contributions to the development of Buddhism in the world today, and especially in the West. For him, the creation and appreciation of art is fertile soil in which the Dharma may put down roots once more. This is because of the key position that art has held in the spiritual life of European civilisation.

While organised Christianity steadily controlled and even suppressed the free play of imagination in Western culture, an elevated imaginative life was sustained among educated people by the survival of the Platonic and Hermetic philosophies and by the evolution of an aesthetic tradition that explores spiritual possibilities beyond mere craft. Sangharakshita believes that it is especially the artists and art-lovers of Europe who kept alive some genuine sense of spiritual life and that Buddhism must recognise its affinity with that tradition if it is to live within the imagination of the West. It may also be that the resolution of the problems faced by Indian Buddhists in rediscovering a Buddhist imagination lies in the development of the aesthetic sensibility.

The argument of *The Religion of Art* is simply stated, although the work contains some very penetrating exploration presented in a highly evocative style that cannot be summarised. Essentially Sangharakshita says that Religion (and by Religion he means religion in its essence: that is the Dharma) is concerned with developing egolessness and that that is the direction of the best in art.

Sangharakshita gives a very significant definition of art:

Art is the organisation of sensuous impressions into pleasurable formal relations that express the artist's sensibility and communicate to his audience a sense of values that can transform their lives.

This definition is of course explored in depth in the essay, but it is worth unpacking a little to draw out the points that are important for present purposes. Art is creative activity that consists in organising the stuff of our sense-experience into new combinations that give pleasure. It is the pleasure we get when we experience artistic creations that makes them so compelling and it is a major factor in the effectiveness of art as a medium of spiritual growth.

The aesthetic hierarchy

Yet pleasurable sensations alone do not make art. We must distinguish in the first place between those pleasures that increase our ego-clinging and those that carry us at least some way beyond ourselves. Much of the pleasure that arises in our lives comes merely from gratifying our appetites – some might argue that the pleasures of sex and eating can perhaps be elevated to the truly aesthetic, but most commonly they are simply the relief of tension, whether of a simple and relatively innocent instinctive kind or of a more complex and perverse variety, as in the case of the pleasure that

some might take in violence. In the Pali Canon the Buddha distinguishes between *sāmisā* and *nirāmisā vedanā*, usually translated as 'worldly' and 'unworldly' hedonic sensation. *Sāmisā* or worldly sensations are the pleasures, pains, and neutral feelings that arise from either the satisfaction, frustration, or lack of stimulation of desires that belong to the cyclic kind of conditionality (interestingly enough, defined sometimes in the Suttas as the '*vedanā* of the householder'), while *nirāmisā* or unworldly hedonic sensations are those that arise in connection with the Path (spoken of as the '*vedanā* of the renunciant').²⁶

Once mere appetite has been accounted for, what is left are pleasurable sensations that do have a positive emotional impact: not merely relieving tension but carrying us a little beyond ourselves, or at least rendering us more sympathetic to the life around us. We could refer to this dimension of experience as the aesthetic, reserving this term for the broadest range of imaginative response to what is pleasing to the senses beyond the relief of appetite. All that comes under this heading is not art, however, which deals in the higher reaches of aesthetic experience. Sangharakshita asserts an aesthetic hierarchy, distinguishing between the pretty, the lovely, and the beautiful.

Prettiness is the delight of a suburban garden in full bloom – delighting but not transporting. Loveliness takes the breath away and arrests us for a while, as when perhaps we look down from a hill upon a rolling vista. Emotionally refreshing as are such experiences, alone they have little lasting impact upon our overall values and direction in life.

Beauty shares with the pretty and the lovely the refined pleasures of the senses that open us up emotionally, but it conjoins with that pleasure moral value and spiritual meaning, not as something separate that is juxtaposed, but as an integral part of a single experience. Beauty, Truth, and Goodness really are apprehended as one. The beautiful object impresses itself upon us as touched by something beyond us, in the sense of beyond our self-attachment. It hints at possibilities of understanding in which utility plays no part and quantity cannot be applied, confounding our measuring, reasoning, bargaining minds. The beautiful brings us into contact with the ultimate mystery of things and we sense the deepest forces that shape existence, the upward momentum within all things. That contact presents us with a strong implicit challenge to live a different and better life. The best in art, arguably what is truly art, always contains this challenge.

Art then is concerned with beauty, in this sense, rather than the pretty or even the lovely: the true artist is always seeking the elusive mystery of the beautiful that hovers just beyond the pen's point or the brush's tip. In that quest for the beautiful are created works that delight the senses and communicate values that lie at the heart of things, impelling us to change our lives. This union in the beautiful of sensuous delight with meaning and value is beyond concepts, although concepts may help us to appreciate it. Once more we are in the territory of imagination: true art speaks directly to the imagination. We may feel the impact of the work without ever

translating it into words. Such art is created out of the combination of the artist's skill in his or her chosen medium with their uplifted imagination – with their sensibility. That imagination or sensibility will be communicated directly to the imagination of those who encounter such work, so they share its creator's values.

The great importance of art, then, from the point of view of the Dharma, is that it appeals to the imagination, which is, as we have seen, the vehicle of spiritual growth and ultimately of realisation. Art not only appeals to the imagination, it educates and refines it. By appreciating the aesthetic, even in the form of the pretty, but especially as the beautiful, our imaginations are exercised and stretched. True art teaches us to apprehend modes of experience previously inaccessible to us. It may even allow us a glimpse of the ultimate beauty that is the content of Bodhi – the beauty that perfectly blends the highest aesthetic satisfaction with the deepest penetration of truth and the most complete and active feeling for all life.

A word of caution should be introduced here: art itself is not enough. It seems that one may be able to appreciate even the most challenging art simply as pleasurable experience: one may experience its loveliness without being touched by its beauty. In this connection, Sangharakshita recalls the experience of the American Zen Rishi, Philip Kapleau. At the end of the Second World War, Kapleau Rishi was present at the war crimes trials of some of the leading Nazi and was deeply struck that several of these men were highly cultured with a strong appreciation of art, and especially of music. Yet they were capable of the most terrible inhumanity. They were able to spend their days ordering, even supervising, mass extermination and then to retire for the evening to listen to Beethoven. Although art is a means of exercising the imagination it is, generally speaking, not enough by itself for the successful following of the Path, even for simple morality. Without clarity of view and conscious Dharma practice, especially in the form of ethics, art easily becomes an indulgence or a delusion. Art needs the Dharma, just as the Dharma needs art if it is truly to take root in the contemporary world.²⁷

Developing the aesthetic imagination

In *The Religion of Art* Sangharakshita argues strongly for the Buddhist practitioner to apply him or herself actively to the aesthetic life. Indeed, surely if one is not developing a more and more refined response to the aesthetic quality of things, and especially to what genuinely expresses beauty, one is unlikely to be developing one's imagination, the vehicle of the Dharma life. We have already seen Sangharakshita assert that a universe that is not alive is not one in which Enlightenment is possible. We could equally say that a mind that is not capable of responding to the beautiful is not one that can gain Enlightenment. Aesthetic development then should be a keynote of contemporary Buddhism. The Sangha should be characterised by a very active aesthetic culture. Sangha members should be creating as much beauty around them as they can and actively seeking it out in their own cultures.

Sangharakshita says that the first thing anyone trying to develop their aesthetic imagination needs to do is to stop engaging with what is unaesthetic. It is necessary to develop some discrimination about what one takes in for, just as what is aesthetically pleasing has a positive effect on the mind, what is ugly or crude affects it negatively. We may, however, not be aware enough to notice what the effect is and we may, out of simple ignorance, surround ourselves with what blunts and distorts our imaginations. From this point of view the Dharma is completely against the cultural relativism that is so widely considered ideologically normative. Art is *not* simply whatever people like. There *is* a hierarchy of beauty and art *can be* distinguished from what is not art – even if it may not always be easy to reach agreement about the boundary between them.

The issue is made more difficult in the context of religion. Much of what passes for religious art is certainly not art – and will therefore not even be religious in any meaningful sense. Sangharakshita distinguishes four categories in connection with religion and art – religion here meaning that which is concerned with self-transcendence, not mere conventional religiosity. There is art that is religious in form but that is not essentially religious: tasteless statues of the Virgin Mary or luridly coloured prints of Ganesh depict 'religious' themes but express no genuine religious sentiment and aesthetic quality. Second, there is art that is neither religious in form nor in essence: much of popular culture is of this kind, as is perhaps a high proportion of the art on sale in commercial galleries. Thirdly, there is art that is religious in essence but not in form: 'Chinese landscape painting, the best of Shelley's poetry, and much of the music of Beethoven', says Sangharakshita, to which one might add, for the sake of keeping up with the evolution of artistic form, the pick of Tarkovsky's films. Finally there is art that is religious both in essence and in form: the best images of the Buddha being the supreme examples.

At the same time as developing some aesthetic discrimination and consciously withdrawing, where that is possible, from what is ugly or life-denying, one can begin actively to cultivate the aesthetic imagination. It is important here to remember that though not all that appeals is art or even genuinely aesthetic, an aesthetic response is not artificial: the imagination is natural, not constructed. One is learning to discover a faculty that one naturally has, not to add something to oneself. This is a delicate matter, because one is discovering something within oneself that is hidden from oneself, and one often requires help to bring it fully into the light of day.

One often requires aesthetic *kalyāṇa mitratā*, 'spiritual friendship', or mentoring, whether from living people or educative literature or even works of art – and it is no coincidence that the Pali and Sanskrit word *kalyāṇā* has the primary meaning of 'beautiful', and an extended meaning of morally good: the *kalyāṇā mitra*, or 'spiritual friend', is one who embodies to some extent and communicates to one what is truly beautiful and good – he or she is one's moral and aesthetic mentor. But, those who are aesthetically immature easily acquire tastes that are not their own: to begin with, one may like what one believes one is 'supposed' to like – in the early days of the FWBO

(now the Triratna Buddhist Community) many of us followed Sangharakshita's artistic inclinations, for instance for the Pre-Raphaelites, without truly having an independent appreciation of them. This aesthetic apprenticeship, for all its naivety, should not be disparaged, for it is often an inevitable first step in discovering one's own natural imaginative response to art.

A successful contemporary Buddhist movement will be alive with *kalyāṇa mitratā* in this aesthetic sense. The environment will be as pleasing as possible, full of objects and images that express the values of the Dharma, whether formally or not. The teaching will be communicated with as much evocation of beauty as of truth and goodness – not merely by way of a formulaic image. There will be a culture of engagement with art, both of the particular place and time and of the aesthetic traditions of the entire world. Those who have developed their aesthetic imaginations to any degree will share their appreciation with others, helping them to discover the rich world of beauty within the great art of all humanity. There will be an atmosphere of aesthetic criticism, in the best sense – the critic as aesthetic educator, sharing his or her aesthetic responses so that others may discover their own. One could even say that a Dharma centre should be as much a centre of the arts as of meditation or doctrine, where people are learning to discover and uplift their aesthetic imaginations.

Sangharakshita has long encouraged the development of arts centres in association with Dharma centres of the Triratna Buddhist Community. For a while in the early 1980's there was an especially successful such arts centre in Croydon.²⁸ It was a notable achievement and there have been but a few other such environments since. One of the functions of such centres has been to bring contemporary artists and writers in many fields together with Buddhists, so that the artists may discover the kinship of their work with the Dharma life and Buddhists may be enriched by the creative work of men and women from their own cultures.

Along with offering an aesthetically pleasing environment and education in the appreciation of art, an effective Sangha will encourage creative endeavour on the part of its members. Even though most people's gifts will not be great, their efforts to paint, write poetry, or sing will stretch their imaginations and open them up to the rich dimension of aesthetic experience. Whilst it is important to distinguish what is truly art from what is not, there should be no snobbishness about the effort to create, despite what will often be its limited quality.

This requires a delicate balance of understanding, for the issue has become complex in recent decades – contemporary egalitarianism tends to abhor all distinction of excellence and all hierarchy of value. A major reason for this is that art has historically been mixed up with class hierarchy or racial and colonial exploitation. But social hierarchy and moral and aesthetic hierarchies have no necessary connection. It is possible to say that one human is morally better than another or that one artist is greater than another quite independent of which class, race, or caste he or she belongs to.

It is important to stress, nonetheless, that the acceptance of a hierarchy of value should imply no contempt for what is at the bottom of the scale. What is to be appreciated is the extent to which any work demonstrates imagination struggling to realise and communicate itself. Imagination is naturally transcending and in any genuinely imaginative work, no matter its lack of subtlety or success, there will be a hint of something rising beyond the skill and understanding of the creator. Even works that are not very refined can communicate deeper values. Many of us have come to the Dharma to some extent inspired by forces within popular culture that express that genuine creativity. Much of the early generation of Sangharakshita's Western disciples, for instance, discovered their first stirrings of spiritual aspiration in the music of Bob Dylan and the like.

The greater mandala of uselessness

This cultivation of the aesthetic at all levels will, then, characterise the life of any serious Buddhist as an integral part of their Dharma practice, for aesthetic appreciation is a key dimension of mindfulness. Sangharakshita points out that true awareness is not merely discernment of the characteristics of an object, especially for their utility, but appreciation of it: 'It's a sort of relishing it – a being in tune with it, being on the same wavelength as it, being in harmony with it even, you could say: not just knowing it'.²⁹ Awareness in this sense is appreciative and non-utilitarian. Indeed, he uses H. V. Guenther's translation of the Sanskrit word, *vidyā*, usually taken to mean 'knowledge', as 'aesthetic appreciation' to make an important point about the Dharma. *Prajñā* itself is seeing everything all the time in this aesthetically appreciative way, which is of course also full of love or *maitrī*.

The Dharma life is then a life in which one is not trying to achieve anything in a purely worldly sense. Beyond the immediate purposes of survival and practice, one does not value the objects of experience for their utility. Whatever one does for those practical purposes is contained within a larger context of aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment – what Sangharakshita has referred to as the 'Greater Mandala of Aesthetic Appreciation' or, more provocatively, the 'Greater Mandala of Uselessness' within which one's useful activities are contained. The Dharma life is essentially play.

It is the aesthetic dimension that transforms the Dharma life into pure play. Aesthetic creation, the 'organisation of sensuous impressions into pleasurable formal relations', is essentially play, 'purposiveness without purpose'.³⁰ Art has its roots in the casual knocking of a poker against a log in the fire to watch the sparks fly, the skimming of a stone across a pond for the relish of the spreading ripples, the crying out of a descant of mere sounds for the pleasure of an echo, or the making of marks on paper for the delight of the pen's flow. Rearranging one's room, planting a bed of flowers, even choosing new clothes, all may be small steps into the aesthetic realm, without which life is merely a dull struggle for survival. Ultimately it is only in this aesthetic dimension – or in the dimension of imagination, to put even the aesthetic in context –

that life's meaning and value is to be found. Without this dimension life is truly not worth living.

The Dharma life is this aesthetic play lived out in a context of recognition of the truth of things and of deep empathy with the life in all. This is the Bodhisattva's *līlā*, play or sport – playful activity that spontaneously helps all beings to awaken to the ultimate beauty of existence. This aesthetic dimension is not only represented in appreciation of the arts and artistic creativity, but in meditation and in other aspects of practice such as ethics or devotion. When the Dharma life is lived for its own sake alone then it is truly the Dharma life.

IMAGINING THE BUDDHA

Imagination is the faculty within us that naturally empathises with the life all around us and that responds spontaneously to the aesthetic quality of things. Yet such responsiveness is not in itself enough.

An imaginative empathy that resonates with the life in all things is indeed wonderful, and a goal most of us have yet to achieve. Yet once achieved it can all too easily be lost and one may tumble back into isolation, even alienation: in classical Buddhist terms, one may fall from the highest god realms into the deepest hells. This is because within even the most intense empathy there lingers a trace of selfishness that divides one finally from what is other. One's empathic resonance with the other is predicated on one's own self-clinging: one recognises in them the same life one cherishes in oneself and therefore cannot wish them harm. That quiver of self-attachment must be seen through and abandoned if the boundless compassion of the Buddha, manifesting in accordance with *Dharma niyāma* processes, is to be released. The ethics of empathy must be transcended in the entirely selfless ethics of Enlightenment.

Similarly, an imaginative response to aesthetic qualities is not enough. It is not enough to enjoy the pretty and the lovely wherever they are to be found, enriching and elevating though they may be. In the first place this is because the capacity for aesthetic appreciation is not self-sustaining. Until Stream Entry is attained, it is karmically based: it is the result, the *vipāka*, of previous effort and will only endure while one is investing sufficient skilful activity to feed it. But even more significantly, aesthetic experience cannot be had unalloyed. Life sooner or later contains both pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness.

The problem of the unavoidability of ugliness is even more pronounced if one is living mainly for aesthetic pleasures. Such a life will sooner or later be a tragic one: reality always contains what is ugly and imperfect; the worm always gnaws within the loveliest rose. In the traditional list of *viparyāsas*, *aśubha*, 'ugliness' or 'repulsiveness', is added to the three *lakṣaṇas* of *anitya*, *anatman*, and *duḥkha*, as omnipresent characteristics of mundane existence that we turn upside down in our

habitual misinterpretation of our experience, assuming that we can find permanence, substantial reality, abiding happiness, and a perfectly satisfying combination of life-factors. To avoid encountering the *aśubha* one will be compelled to erect a 'Palace of Art', as in Tennyson's poem, in which everything unpleasant is kept at bay, like the gated compounds of the super-rich – or the palaces in which the young Gautama was legendarily beguiled. Eventually the ugly and unpleasant must break through and one's heaven will be transformed into a hell. One must therefore seek not merely the pretty and the lovely but the beautiful, shining with an unearthly light, reflected from a dimension beyond our self-clinging.

The transcendental object

For these reasons neither empathy nor aesthetics are enough and can only be aspects of Buddhism, not the whole. The Dharma is not concerned merely with temporarily maximising happiness within this existence. Its aim is the complete transcendence of all suffering through a direct experience of the way things really are. Empathy and responsiveness to the aesthetically pleasing are nonetheless vitally important for the Dharma life, because their exercise stretches and refines imagination, preparing it for the ultimate truth of things. But an indefinite development of empathy or refinement of sensibility alone does not necessarily lead to Bodhi. There must be an intervention from beyond one's conscious identity. One needs to direct oneself towards and to encounter what Sangharakshita calls a 'transcendental object'.

If one is to orient oneself towards and open up to one's ultimate aim it must take a vivid embodiment somewhere within one's experience. If that transcendental object does not intervene one remains locked within the walls one's own, at best, highly refined self-attachment – and that refinement will not, in the long run, be self-sustaining: it depends all the time upon renewed *karma*. If one is to free oneself finally from the agonies and turbulence of the Wheel of Life, conditioned processes of the *karma niyāma* must give way to irreversible *Dharma niyāma* processes. We need to give ourselves up to that transcendental object.

The transcendental object is encountered not as something we have created but as something that is greater than us and independent of us, reaching down to us. Our imaginations ascend: the image descends. But what is the transcendental object? Here we enter great mysteries. Our ordinary minds cannot comprehend what lies beyond them: we cannot see it with our fleshly eyes or reason it with our routine concepts – even our feelings reduce it to the sentimental circumference of our personal histories. Only the imagination can reach up towards that transcendental object and invite its guiding and transforming presence into our lives. Our imaginations can be illumined by a light that shines from beyond us.

This is strange territory for those of us who are post-Christians – or post-Hindus or former devotees of any other theistic brand. We begin to sense the sinister presence of **GOD** – and many of us will recoil with loathing and contempt. But perhaps we need

bolder hearts and clearer minds. The problem with God is that an imaginative experience has been taken too literally in the context of inadequate understanding of the nature of things – of wrong view. The experience that some describe as God may be a genuine one. Something that appears as greater than oneself may have irrupted into one's imagination. The problem of God is not the experience itself but the way we think about it and our relation to it, as well as the theological and ecclesiastical machinery with which the idea becomes surrounded.

The Buddhist need not deny the experience but will subject it first to analysis in terms of *pratītya-samutpāda* – nothing can exist eternally, whether within us or without us: all is change, all is without substance. Then we can approach the raw experience on its own terms, considering it the object of the imagination, perhaps even of the illumined imagination, beyond all conceptual designation. As Buddhists we simply do not use that language of God because it is unhelpful and easily becomes the justification of much evil.³¹

The illumined image

The transcendental object is experienced by the imagination. In other words it is an image, in the broadest sense. But it is an image that carries the mystery of Enlightenment to us so that we may contemplate it and finally realise it. It is, in Sangharakshita's phrase, an 'illumined image'. Into our purified and uplifted imaginations there descends, apparently under its own power, an image illumined from beyond, that in its turn illumines our imaginations.

What then is the illumined imagination? In the field of ethics it is empathy without any trace of self-attachment – the compassion of the Bodhisattva. In art it is sensitivity to the beautiful, in the highest sense, in an artistic creation – and ultimately to the beauty that lies in all things, truly considered.³² Illumined imagination is a pure responsiveness, without any trace of self-clinging. This is quite beyond our usual mode of experience, which is underlain by a deep and largely unconscious self-orientation: everything is finally weighed by the compelling measure of self. Even one's exalted moods of empathy and of creative appreciation are tinged with subjectivity. Illumined imagination breaks through the confining circle of self and resonates with the deepest chords of life. In terms of *pratītya-samutpāda*, one senses directly the progressive order of conditionality that runs through all things and that finds its fullest and freest manifestation in *Dharma niyāma* processes. One feels the very pulse of life.

When the imagination is finally and completely illumined it perceives everywhere the illumined image: everything is known as it truly is, and is loved with unbounded compassion, free from all sentiment.³³ However, in order to realise that ultimate exaltation of imagination, we require a ladder to lift ourselves up, rungs and handholds within our grasp that raise us above our present standpoint. We require specific images that are accessible to us within our own imaginations yet that are

illuminated from beyond our self-clinging. We require imaginative intermediaries that we can contemplate with the whole force of our uplifted imaginations and that will then connect us with the light of Bodhi. This is what we are doing when we embark upon the fourth stage of Sangharakshita's System of Meditation: the Stage of Spiritual Rebirth. We are feeding our imaginations with illuminated images that have a special correspondence with Bodhi, inviting the light that shines in them to shine on us, transforming us so that we too are illuminated. Most characteristically the images that are contemplated are archetypal visions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Contemplating the Buddha

Why is the most characteristic image for contemplation in Buddhism a figure of a Buddha? In principle any image can be illuminated – in the Ch'an and Zen traditions it is said that Mahakashyapa gained Enlightenment when he saw the Buddha hold up a golden flower. One could say that illumination is in the eye of the perceiver, not in the object – although that perhaps reduces the whole matter to a two-dimensional logic that imagination defies. However, some images will be more generally effective – and particular ones will appeal to different individuals.

Sangharakshita has spoken of this as a matter of correspondence in the Hermetic, magico-symbolic sense: something on one level of meaning in some mysterious way invokes something on another – perhaps the most universal experience of this kind is the 'sacred' atmosphere picked up in some places, for instance, some Gothic cathedrals or ancient tumuli. Particular forms and situations allow far easier access to the realm of imagination. This is sometimes referred to in Celtic culture as 'thinness': a place is 'thin' in the sense that the veil that separates this world from the other world of gods and spirits is more easily passed through in that location.³⁴ In the same way, some images are more readily aligned with Bodhi. Which images correspond most closely with Bodhi will have some universal basis, but the precise lineaments of their appearance will be determined by particular culture, character, and psychology – and even simply by circumstance.

The illuminated image is at the intersection of two movements: one going upward from the gathered imaginative powers of the particular individual and the other experienced as coming downward from a dimension beyond the individual. Both the ascending and the descending currents must be present for the image to be illuminated. It must present itself in a form we can recognise within our sensory and visionary experience, but it will carry a meaning beyond our normal understanding. The figure of the Buddha is the image that most generally unifies both the ascending imaginative fascination of the Dharma practitioner and the descending force of illumination.

There are a number of reasons why the figure of the Buddha is the image most easily illuminated. Let us start with the most obvious: it was the historical Buddha, Gautama Shakyamuni, who gained Enlightenment and taught the Dharma as the Path that leads to it. We can therefore understand who he was from an historical point of view: a

human being like us with a human experience like ours. But we also know that he entered upon an experience that passes our present understanding. As human being we can know him; as illumined we cannot, at least not fully, not yet. The confluence in a single image of what we can know with the Bodhi that we can only intuit blends the upward and downward currents that engender illumination.

The image of the Buddha is not only a representation of his realisation, but of his teaching, which was a communication of the content of his Bodhi. As much as anything, his teaching tells us what the Dharma is *not*. It teaches that there are no eternal essences but that this does not reduce everything to mere matter or leave us with a nihilistic denial of value and meaning. He taught a Middle Way between these two extremes: there is a flow of conditioned processes, which may either simply circle endlessly round or may rise up without limit to ever new levels of conscious manifestation. Following that augmentative, spiral-like flow of conditions is the Path taught by the Buddha that leads to his Enlightenment – and, we might say, beyond.

When we contemplate the image of the Buddha as the embodiment of his Dharma we are conscious therefore of what he is not: he is not an eternal god, far less the creator of the universe or cosmic judge, but he is not a mere human being, bounded by a single lifespan. He hovers beyond our conceptual comprehension, an expression of the mystery of the Middle Way. In the words of the *Manjuśri Stuti Sādhana* that Sangharakshita received from Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche, we see the Bodhisattva's image as appearing while we “thus 'integrate', in the *māyā* way that does not prevent the causally-originated semblances, though it transcends the constructions, 'all things', and 'I', 'the *skandhas*' and consciousness”. When we see the image of the Buddha and are aware of what he taught historically, we recognise that we must lay aside our conceptual grasping onto either existence or non-existence. That enables us to enter the pure space of imagination in which all is directly recognised as 'void yet appearing; appearing yet void'.

One could say that the core conceptual teachings of the Buddha are gateways to direct imaginative experience and his own figure unmistakably embodies those entry points. The image of the Buddha is therefore the central image in Buddhism: the image that is most likely to be transformed into an illumined image because it invokes our wonder and reverence without limit yet is least likely to be taken literally as an eternal substance.

There is more yet to the significance of the Buddha image: it helps us to avoid thinking of what transcends the human as impersonal. Sangharakshita points out that, when we think of something as impersonal, we think of it as less than a person – as sub-personal rather than supra-personal – essentially as dead.³⁵ He therefore argues that it is best to think of and represent the supra-personal dimension with a person. What is represented is a human being, albeit often in idealised form. Yet what is symbolised is something beyond the merely human: a dimension of experience that quite transcends ordinary humanity – and is certainly not impersonal.

For these and other reasons the image of the Buddha is the central symbol of the Buddhist tradition, although not the only one. It is the central image because it is the one that best and most unequivocally invokes, in various ways, what Buddhists understand to be the nature of his experience. By contemplating that image the practitioner's imagination may most easily be absorbed, refined, and finally illumined.

Images of Enlightenment in Buddhist History

But, many Buddhists today focus on figures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that are not understood to represent the human historical Buddha, Gautama Shakyamuni, in any sense at all. This has come about under particular conditions. It is worth giving Sangharakshita's impression of the tradition's unfolding history, in this respect, albeit one that must be highly interpretative, since there is much that is still very obscure about Buddhism's Indian past. His perspective on that history is a key to how he would like to see practice in the Triratna Buddhist Community develop.

Even for the Buddha himself there seems to have been a transcendental object. In the *Gārava Sutta* he is presented, in the days immediately after his Enlightenment at Bodhgaya, as recognising the need to revere and rely upon something, for one 'dwells in suffering' without it. No living person could fill that place for him, since he was supreme in ethics, meditation, and wisdom: he could only revere and rely upon the Dharma. But clearly here the Dharma means something more than the body of teachings, even something more than a principle.³⁶ What exactly it does mean is precisely the mystery that only imagination can enter.

The Buddha revered the Dharma, but his disciples, including his Enlightened disciples, revered him.³⁷ They revered him, of course, out of their deep gratitude to him for showing them the way to *nirvāṇa*, but he also embodied for them that something greater than themselves that was the content of Enlightenment. It seems that in the early tradition this was as far as it was felt necessary to go and the Buddha himself remained the sole object of reverence for some centuries. To think of the Buddha was to gain an imaginative connection with his Bodhi. That was enough.

For the earliest Buddhists the historical Buddha seems to have remained a powerful imaginative presence that it was even unnecessary to depict figuratively. Various symbols were used to represent each main phase in his life iconographically: footprints for his birth, a tree for his Enlightenment, a wheel for his first teaching, and a stupa for his *Parinirvāṇa*. As the centuries rolled on, the figure of the Buddha came to be represented in various forms and these images were the focus for worship, treated as if they were the Buddha himself, present with his followers. Inevitably these representations became less and less naturalistic, more idealised.

In the later development now known as the Mahayana, new Buddha forms arose that

were not at all identified with the historical Shakyamuni or his life. These Buddhas were considered to be Enlightened in the same way that Shakyamuni was Enlightened, but independent of him, perhaps coming from completely different world-systems. Similarly Bodhisattvas emerged: beings who were on the way to Enlightenment in the same way as the Buddha-to-be of the *Jātakas* had been, but again independent of his own mythic history.

To contain this development, the doctrine of the *Trikāya* or 'Three Bodies' developed as an explanatory framework: the *nirmāṇakāya* represented the level of historical fact, the Buddha's actual existence on this planet as an ordinary human being and his awakening to Bodhi from the human state; the *samboghakāya* is Enlightenment as we see it with the eye of illumined imagination, appearing in the form of archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; the *Dharmakāya* is the essence of the Buddha's Bodhi, beyond all possible representation, by virtue of which the other *kāyas* are bodies of the Buddha – illumined images.

A final phase in the history of Buddhism, the Tantra, saw the proliferation of images, under the influence of Indian magic and later Tibetan and Far Eastern shamanism. A rich pantheon of figures of fascinating and bewildering variety danced from the imaginations of the Tantric siddhas and became a required aspect of Vajrayana practice, invoked to this day. Some such figures were presented as terrifying wrathful demons and others had animal heads or bodies – yet many of these were considered to be Buddhas or Bodhisattvas.

How we view this history influences how we today, especially in the Triratna Buddhist Community, are to approach traditional imagery and how we are to imagine the Buddha ourselves. Sangharakshita considers that the historical Buddha is the touchstone of the whole tradition, whether as regards doctrine or imagery. In the case of the teachings the touchstone is the Buddha's words as found in the earliest Suttas. Whatever doctrines evolved later, such as the *Trikaya*, should be tested against the basic teachings found in the early records, especially, although not solely, in the Pali Canon.³⁸ But this implies no fundamentalism. The tradition should not be considered closed and later developments may be very useful, indeed may embody oral records of the Buddha's teachings not set down in the early canons. There are important doctrinal developments in Mahayana Sutras and commentaries that are fully compatible with basic teachings and that help to clarify and deepen understanding – so long as they are approached in the context of the basic teachings and are faithful to its essential methodology.³⁹

In a similar way, Sangharakshita considers that the image of the Buddha is the touchstone of all later developments in imagery. The wealth of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that emerged in the Mahayana should all be understood as the unfolding imaginative exploration and experience of the nature of the Buddha's Bodhi – the inner content of the Dharma that was the object of the Buddha's reverence upon which he himself relied. In this respect the Mahayana fulfilled a very important need,

since the early tradition does not seem, to any great degree, to have developed devotional and imaginative approaches to understanding and connecting with Enlightenment, perhaps finding the Buddha himself sufficient embodiment of the goal. But, as the historical Buddha became a more distant figure, new ways of imagining Bodhi arose quite naturally, giving imaginative depth and power to the concepts through which the Dharma was communicated.

Gradually there emerged a very appealing imaginative world, with its own poetic philosophy, such as the theory of the *trikāya*, that expressed the nature of that world in positive terms without violating the principles of *pratītya-samutpāda* – it was a philosophy of 'as if' writ large. Sangharakshita sees these three *kāyas* as representing levels of connection, even communication, with Bodhi, offering a kind of theoretical structure for understanding the images through which it was presented. With one's ordinary mind and ordinary senses one can know the Buddha, or at least know of him, as *nirmāṇakāya*. With one's illumined imagination one can perceive the deeper nature of his Enlightenment as *samboghakāya*, in the various archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. With fully realised Wisdom one directly knows, even oneself embodies, the *Dharmakāya*, that dimension the realisation of which has transformed the historical Gautama into the Buddha, and that enters into and illumines our own uplifted imaginations.

Sangharakshita believes, however, that there has been a tendency for later developments to lose their connection with the earlier and for some schools to emphasise other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas at the expense of Shakyamuni. Besides neglecting our overwhelming debt to him, this makes it easy to lose sight of what he taught. Some schools today rely almost entirely on late doctrinal developments, not anchored in the teachings from which they originate. This has left much that is questionably Buddhist, in spirit if not in letter. He considers that all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who emerged later should be viewed as expressions of Shakyamuni's Bodhi, exploring in imaginative terms, the only ones available to us once we have reached the limits of concepts, what that Enlightenment really means. In a sense they all *are* Shakyamuni Buddha. In order to give this iconographic expression he has asked one of his artist disciples to depict the historical Buddha surrounded by an aura within which can be discerned all the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas emerging and re-merging.

To sum up so far: the early tradition is the doctrinal and imaginative touchstone for what developed in later centuries. The Mahayana explores doctrine and image far more fully than the Buddha and his immediate disciples did, but whatever emerged in that exploration must be tested against the Buddha's image and his own words, so far as we can know them – and much must be discarded, especially in the doctrinal field. Essentially those images are to be understood in terms of the historical Buddha's own experience. But what of the profusion of the Vajrayana? Of course much that goes under the heading of Vajrayana is simply Mahayana and can be submitted to the test of its conformity with the early tradition. However, Sangharakshita is wary of the

more specifically Tantric developments. He considers that much Tantric imagery, especially its demonic forms, does not 'feel' like Buddhism, however much primal appeal it may have.

This raises an important issue: a powerful image is not necessarily an illumined one. An image may touch on very deep themes in life and communicate powerful universal forces that impart a strong psychic charge. This does not, however, by any means signify that it is an illumined image – or readily capable of being illumined, except in the sense that ultimately all images may be illumined. The fact that an image appeals very strongly or that it appears very powerfully in dreams or visions does not necessarily mean that it is a suitable one for contemplation in the hope of it becoming illumined.⁴⁰

Finding illumined images

Let us sum up the discussion of imagining the Buddha so far. For the imagination to be illumined we need to feed it illumined images – or images that easily carry illumination. The image readiest to hand and least ambiguous in this respect is the image of the Buddha, albeit in idealised and enriched form, presenting itself in the language of exalted and intensified imagination. This process of enrichment and idealisation is found in Buddhist tradition especially in the Mahayana.

Where then does that leave the Buddhist today? Are we to draw on the Mahayana for our illuminable images? This is largely what the FWBO/Triratna Buddhist Community has done since its inauguration. At their ordination within the Order Sangharakshita initiated each of his disciples into a visualisation practice or *sādhana*, by ritually repeating a mantra. At first the forms of meditation on those images were those he himself had been initiated into by gurus in the Tibetan tradition – or were based upon them. That procedure has broadly continued to the present, with his own disciples initiating their disciples into a range of practices coming directly or indirectly from Tibetan sources. Those being ordained have till now been introduced to the way of visualising a particular Buddha or Bodhisattva in terms of specific colours, gestures, and accoutrements in the context of a fixed 'drama' of unfolding appearance and connection. The appearance is accompanied by the recitation of mantras and verses drawn from the Indo-Tibetan Mahayana tradition.

Sangharakshita has for some time made it clear that he does not see these practices as belonging within the Tibetan tradition and he has very specifically rejected the ritual context and doctrinal elaboration within which that tradition has embedded them. Over the years there have been various phases of revising and revisioning the practices available to Order members. Nonetheless they have continued to hover in an uneasy space, part of yet not part of Tibetan Buddhism. As in so many areas, Sangharakshita himself, with the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community following sometimes testily in his wake, has made a slow journey from forms and doctrines taken from extant Buddhist schools to something more essentially Buddhist, worked

out in our own situation from fundamental principles derived from the Buddha himself. This has at times been confusing for his disciples, who have generally a less sharp eye for principles than he himself has. We are often left clinging to forms he introduced us to, while he himself has cut deeper to the heart of the matter.

The area of imaginative exploration here under discussion is one in which he wishes us much more decisively to leave behind the forms and thoughts of later tradition – in this case especially of Tibetan Buddhism. He says that though he himself did take initiation and teaching from great Tibetan teachers, he did so not because they were specifically from the Tibetan tradition, to which he never felt any special attraction. He sat at their feet because they were individuals who made a powerful spiritual impact upon him and he has always seen the teachings and practices they gave him in the light of the Buddha's own essential message, rather than of this or that particular school.

In respect of these practices, Sangharakshita wants his disciples to break much more decisively with Tibetan tradition – without of course belittling or devaluing it for those for whom it is culturally appropriate. In the first place, it is clear that many members of the Order do not get on well with this form of practice, important as it might have seemed to them at ordination because of the powerful ritual context in which they received it. Many have simply stopped doing the *sādhana* they were given and have concentrated on more basic practices. Some others have taken the context from which the practices are apparently derived as the one in which they are practising and have looked to Tibetan Buddhist sources for specific guidance. For a small minority it seems that the Order is experienced as more or less an extension of the Tibetan tradition, especially of the Nyingma school. This of course leads to divergences of view and practice that threaten the future unity of the community.

But the main issue is the missed opportunity. In trying to follow late developments in Buddhist tradition we cut ourselves off increasingly from the Buddha and from the opportunity to find him in our own imaginations that have been formed within our contemporary cultures. For most this will mean that, though apparently faithful Buddhists, their real faith will remain in the material world, for without an imaginative world beyond this one, there is no other. They will not be able to bring imaginative depth to their own Dharma lives and they will not be able to contribute to the creation of a new Buddhist culture in the heart of the cultures around us, thereby opening up a route into the Dharma for many, many others in the future. Buddhism will continue to inhabit a world from which God has been abstracted and no more effective image has taken his place to give experience its ultimate depth. It will veritably have become 'European Buddhism', the 'passive nihilism' that Nietzsche so feared as the twilight of Western civilisation.⁴¹

What Sangharakshita believes we must do is to take inspiration from the *process* the tradition went through, not its *products*. We have seen that, after the Buddha's Parinirvāṇa, his disciples felt a continuing imaginative connection with him and with

the experience he had realised. As the centuries went by this evolved into a wealth of figures and forms that expressed the inner nature of Enlightenment. The worship and contemplation of these forms, in the context of other practices, was for many a way of realising the Dharma. For them Buddhahood was a real presence in their lives and they learnt directly from that source, long after Shakyamuni had ceased to live on this Earth.

This process has to take place again in our own circumstances, so radically different in kind. We must go back to the historical Buddha and allow his Enlightenment to express itself afresh in our own imaginations. Some of us may be inspired by forms that have already appeared - but perhaps we should be careful not to allow them to be a short cut, thereby failing to discover what the Buddha and his Bodhi look like in this modern world. We need to re-imagine the Buddha or to discover him again within our own imaginations.

Buddhists must set out on a journey to reawaken the imagination so that the Buddha may arise. Imagination needs therefore to be engaged, fed, and expressed at every stage of involvement with the Dharma – which means at every stage of involvement with the Sangha. This can be looked at in terms of what Sangharakshita considers the unifying theme of Buddhism: Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. He sees Going for Refuge as the act that characterises all aspects of the Dharma life and that embodies doctrine in action.⁴² It takes place repeatedly on deeper and deeper levels until Enlightenment is reached. He distinguishes five levels of Going for Refuge.

At first, especially in traditional 'Buddhist' cultures, Going for Refuge is '*cultural*', insofar as one identifies oneself as a Buddhist because that is one's ancestral culture. When one begins to practise the Dharma to any extent one's Going for Refuge becomes '*provisional*', insofar as one does actually try to put the Buddha's teaching into practice at least while the inspiration lasts or the class or retreat is in progress. These are preliminary but very important stages.

The most critical stage is where Going for Refuge becomes '*effective*'. One has a sufficiently strong experience of the Dharma to be able to dedicate one's life to it and to put its practice into effect. At this stage one dedicates oneself to acting in accordance with *karma niyāma* processes that will lead one to see directly for oneself that there are no fixed essences within or without. At that point one's Going for Refuge becomes '*real*', because *Dharma niyāma* processes begin to unfold within one and one's Going for Refuge is spontaneous and irreversible. *Absolute* Going for Refuge is the point at which one becomes oneself the Refuge.

One Goes for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. But, historically speaking, the Buddha is the most significant of the three insofar as the other two emerge from his experience of Enlightenment: he rediscovered and made the Dharma known in this era and he formed the Sangha. The Buddha stands in the whole schema of Going

for Refuge for the ultimate objective and content of the Dharma life. That life is lived to become like the Buddha and to see what he sees. The levels of Going for Refuge are then levels of connection with the Buddha.

At the *cultural* level, the Buddha is simply the badge of one's culture and community, having some positive ethical and social influence upon one. In *provisional* Going for Refuge the Buddha begins to beckon as a personal ideal; one begins to recognise what he represents, both for oneself and for the entire universe. With *effective* Going for Refuge one has had a glimpse of the reality of Bodhi – or at least, in Sangharakshita's phrase, a 'glimpse of a glimpse' sufficient to keep one's efforts alive. *Real* Going for Refuge begins once one realises directly for oneself the true nature of the Buddha and *absolute* Going for Refuge is the point at which one merges with it.

Throughout the schema of the levels of Going for Refuge the Buddha and his Enlightenment are the object of one's aspiration. They represent the mystery that lies beyond one's present understanding and that one is seeking to penetrate. As we have seen, Sangharakshita terms this the 'transcendental object', the image that stands in one's imaginative world for what passes beyond understanding but that gives life its meaning and focus. Without that transcendental object in one's imagination there can be no Going for Refuge in an effective sense.

This is a fundamental point in Sangharakshita's approach and worth re-stressing here. When one Goes for Refuge to the Three Jewels there must be some felt sense of the Buddha and his Enlightened experience within one's own imagination. At every level of engagement with Buddhism, there will be an engagement with the image of the Buddha: first of all as a beloved cultural badge or sign, then as a provisional sense of the vastness that Buddhahood encompasses, then as a definite and abiding presence within one's imaginative experience that one can effectively commit oneself to, then as a force moving one onward and upward beyond oneself, and finally as a freedom and consummation quite beyond our knowing. It is this image of the Buddha at each level that we must look for if we are to discover the Buddha again for our times.

One's image of the Buddha will gradually emerge and develop as one involves oneself more and more deeply with the Dharma and the Sangha. One will first become accustomed to Buddhist symbols and especially to images of the Buddha, towards which one will feel some fascination and even devotion. This will often be initiated by the presence of a Buddha-statue in the shrine room where one is taught to meditate and hears the Dharma. One will find out about the Buddha's life and come to know some stories about him. As one's experience deepens one will come to understand what Buddhahood means and what part the Buddha has played in world history. Gradually the Buddha and his Enlightenment will take on some independent imaginative life within one. For some this will be quite clear and definite, perhaps connected with very particular visionary images. For many it will be something far more inchoate, perhaps more an atmosphere or a felt sense of the nature of a Buddha's awareness. Some will feel a growing presence in their lives, as if there was

a consciousness greater than their own, encompassing them, even communicating with them.

A problem frequently arises here, as we have already seen: the problem of God. In the West most of those coming to Buddhism have either rejected Christianity and its God or have been raised in a materialist culture within which God is simply an empty myth, long exploded. The idea of feeling a presence within one of a consciousness greater than one's own is either to be rejected with loathing or to be laughed at as a minor and immature delusion. However, the image of the Buddha arises within the cultural space vacated by God. We must learn to accept stirrings in that imaginative space, whilst being fully aware of the absolute differences between the Buddha as a transcendental object on the one hand and God, from whatsoever theological context. It will probably be very difficult indeed for Buddhism to develop in the Western world until we find the middle way between an acceptance of God and rejection of the deep imagination as a source of values, even of truth.

The Triratna Buddhist Community discovers the Buddha

The starting point for discovering the image of the Buddha is paying attention to him as an historical personality. On that basis our imaginations take off. We get at the inner reality of his Bodhi by first developing a vivid sense of his having been alive here on this Earth. This sense of the historical reality of the Buddha's life can be deliberately fostered in a number of ways, for instance, by having images of him as the principal focus in our shrine-rooms, rather than other forms that developed later in tradition on the basis of his image. Images of him are triggers for our recollection of him and can therefore be treated as if they were the Buddha himself: when entering the shrine-room one can act as if one was really coming into the presence of the Buddha; one can bow before the image as though bowing to the Buddha himself; one can recite pujas and *vandana*, addressing oneself directly to him – especially significant in this respect is the *Tiratana Vandana*, whose principal verses are found in the Pali Suttas, pronounced by the Buddha himself. These fundamental rituals are powerful means of bringing the image of the Buddha to life in one's imagination.⁴³

We can also strengthen our sense of the Buddha's actual existence by learning about and reflecting on his life and by reading the Suttas that present him teaching the Dharma – reading them as much for an imaginative connection with him as for the specific teachings they contain. We can recall that whatever spiritual practices we engage in have come to us, directly or indirectly, from him: for instance, he taught our basic meditation practices, the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Development of Loving-Kindness. We are, in this sense, very directly his disciples.

An especially powerful practice for developing a sense of the Buddha's historical reality and connecting with his significance is pilgrimage to the principal places connected with his life: Lumbini, where he was born, Bodhgaya, where he gained Enlightenment, Saranath, where he first taught the Dharma, and Kushinagara, where

he entered *Parinirvāṇa*. He himself is presented in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* as saying that going on pilgrimage to these four places will 'arouse emotion', which is construed as a strong sense of commitment to following the path he discovered. He says that when people see the stupas raised over his remains their 'hearts are made peaceful, and then, at the breaking-up of the body after death they go to a good destiny and re-arise in a heavenly world.'¹⁴⁴

These efforts to deepen a sense of the Buddha as an historical figure, activate his image in our imaginations – after all, our sense of any aspect of history is itself an act of imagination. Once that image has come alive it will take on deeper and richer significance as we contemplate it more closely and reflect upon it more wholeheartedly.

As contact with the Dharma deepens on this basis, so the image of the Buddha grows in power and presence. When the Buddha and his Enlightenment become the guiding force in one's life then one will commit oneself fully and effectively to the Buddhist path. In the Triratna Buddhist Order that commitment is expressed in ordination as a Dharmachari or Dharmacharini. Those responsible for selecting and ordaining candidates for ordination are especially looking for the enduring and effective presence of the image of Enlightenment in the candidate's life, continually drawing them on in their spiritual efforts.

This point is worth reiterating. One cannot Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels at all effectively unless there is a deep imaginative connection with the Three Jewels and especially with the Buddha and his Enlightenment. These ideals will be embodied in an image or images, standing within our imaginative experience for something beyond our present knowledge, enabling us to have a real felt sense of what Buddhahood signifies. As must be stressed again and again, 'image' here does not necessarily mean a visual image, although it frequently will find visual expression. Imagination deals in objects derived from all the physical senses and from subtle visionary senses, as well as from much less articulate intuitions, such as knowing that one is not alone in a room without actually catching sight of anyone. Indeed, much of our imaginative experience of Bodhi will be difficult to describe, even to ourselves. But that sense of something echoing in us from beyond us must be present if we are to commit ourselves to the Dharma life. It must not merely be present: it must be recognised and acknowledged, valued and developed.

In this connection Sangharakshita has commented that the image of the Buddha may at times be experienced, as it were, by its absence. One may be vividly aware of one's own *unenlightenment*, one's distance from the Buddha, rather than of the Buddha's own presence. This is not a feeling of remorsefulness (although that may be part of it, insofar as one has acted unskillfully), and it is definitely not connected with neurotic guilt, in the sense of feeling unworthy and unlovable because of one's childhood experiences. One may feel quite happy and confident, in an ordinary human sense, and yet feel intensely that one is trapped by one's fundamental ignorance of the nature

of things in a vicious circle of self-attachment. Indeed this recognition is necessary for a full realisation of the Buddha's image: it is only to the extent that one knows one is not the Buddha that one can know the Buddha: shadows reveal the light of the sun. Without this acknowledgement of the real state of things, the image of the Buddha cannot be illumined.

Those who formally commit themselves to the Dharma life through ordination into the Triratna Buddhist Order have felt the presence of the Buddha and his Bodhi in their imaginations and that is explicitly developed in a new dimension of spiritual practice – in Sangharakshita's fourfold System of Meditation this is the final stage, Spiritual Rebirth.⁴⁵ In this system, the stage of Spiritual Rebirth succeeds the stage of Spiritual Death, which is concerned with seeing through self-clinging. One then connects imaginatively with what transcends self-clinging – what is left when spiritual death has occurred to any extent. What remains is an image, the image of Enlightenment, and this one dwells upon. By dwelling upon that image one gradually readies it for illumination, when it attains its full, Enlightened significance.⁴⁶

It is the task of the Private Preceptor⁴⁷ to help the person they are ordaining to identify as best they can the Buddha and his Bodhi as represented in their imaginations. They will then work out together how to deepen and develop that connection, so that the image of Enlightenment is more and more present in their lives. This exploration will include, for instance, discovering what sounds invoke a sense of the Buddha's imaginative presence – this may be in the form of a traditional mantra or something more particular to the individual and his or her culture and character. From this mutual search there will gradually come to light a way for each individual to meditate on the image of the Buddha, keeping alive a sense of the Buddha's presence at all times.

It is not at all clear what will emerge within the Triratna Buddhist Order as this approach of searching for the Buddha in our imaginations is applied more and more deeply, without the framework of the Tibetan-derived theory and practices used up until now. It is, however, worth recognising that Enlightenment is already alive in the collective imagination of the Sangha, although perhaps not only or even mainly in terms of the traditional *sādhana*s or Mahayana images. All members of the Triratna Buddhist Order have been acknowledged to be Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels effectively. This means that the image of the Buddha was alive for each at the time of their ordination. In the forty and more years since the Order was formed, many have engaged deeply with that image as it has emerged in their imaginations. Already we are, individually and collectively, re-imagining the Buddha and in us, and in others engaged in like endeavour, Buddhism is gradually finding expression in the contemporary world.

This exploration that the whole Order has embarked upon will give rise to quite new images and new ways of imagining the Buddha, although all based upon the same essential perspective and methodology. Some may be content with the way they are

presently visualising the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and there is no reason for them to abandon what is Dharmically efficacious for them. Others may find that the images from the Mahayana are truly embodiments of their own imaginative life and that they can respond to them wholeheartedly, if less formally. Others again may find quite different figures and forms emerging in their explorations of who the Buddha really is, although these must be tested, in dialogue with preceptors and teachers, to try to discern whether they are genuinely illuminable images or merely powerful archetypes. Perhaps many will not find concrete imaginative focus for their ideal and may have a more shadowy and inchoate sense of an overwhelming supra-personal peace or compassion or awareness that has no form but is nonetheless real and active in their lives.

As time goes on and we take up the approach Sangharakshita is now suggesting, clusters of shared imaginative experience will emerge that will express the shapes that the Buddha assumes in our cultures. We will discover, just as our spiritual ancestors did, the most effective correspondences between images and illumination for our age and cultures, so that future generations will have images appropriate to them that will carry them on to illumination.

THE CONTEXT OF IMAGINATION

Imagination is the vehicle of the Dharma life. If we are to follow the path we must recognise, develop, and even become imagination. We do this especially in the three ways we have already explored: by discovering our natural sensitivity to the living world around us, by recognising and educating our spontaneous aesthetic responses, and by dwelling upon the image of the Buddha that we find in our own minds. But imagination requires a context if it is to unfold in a useful way that leads us on to Enlightenment, for imagination can lead to many difficulties if it is not properly understood and worked with. The wrong development of imagination brings moral stagnation, delusion, or even madness – after all, much that is evil in the world is the product of distorted imagination. In the Buddha-Dharma the necessary safeguards for the successful unfolding of imagination are to be found in Right View, mindfulness (especially initially of the body), Sangha, ethics, and one might say in the Buddha himself. We will examine each of these in turn.

Right View, most basically expressed as *pratītya-samutpāda*, defines the limits of rational understanding. It cuts away all theoretical interpretation of our experience either as truly existing in an ultimate sense or as really non-existent. It prevents us from literalising our imaginative experience, either taking what is imaginative for real in a narrowly historical sense or dismissing it as mere fantasy. It is within each of these two tendencies, eternalism and nihilism, that the dangers to imagination lie.

We may on the one hand take images and visions as revelations about the world of historical fact, as when we believe that we have a divine mission to carry out specific tasks – an extreme of this is violence committed in the name of religion, but there are

many more apparently benign versions. On the other, we may take the world of historical fact as the only reality and thereby dismiss the imagination as mere fantasy, in which case it will manipulate us without our being conscious of it – arguably the effects of this are widely visible in the environmental degradation in the world today, brought about by our narrow scientific culture. These tendencies to take imaginative experience literally are exemplified in the *Brahmājāla Sutta*, which lists sixty-four wrong views, many of which arise from a misinterpretation of experience, whether of a historical or visionary kind.⁴⁸

Armed with Right View one can recognise the significance of the imaginative realm, taking it fully seriously in its own right, without interpreting it literally in terms of everyday experience. It is important that one gets as deep and clear a grasp of Right View as soon as possible in one's Dharma life, otherwise distortion and delusion may follow and lead to many problems – or one will simply escape the conflicts that arise by retreating into a merely conventional life. What getting a grasp of Right View essentially means is understanding what one is doing when one thinks – and what thinking cannot do.

*Effectively to distinguish between thoughts and things, between the concepts that merely indicate realities and those realities themselves, is an art belonging to a highly advanced stage of spiritual culture.*⁴⁹

It is this culture that must develop in the contemporary world if imagination is to flourish.

The task of distinguishing between thoughts and things is to a considerable extent an intellectual one: one must learn to deconstruct one's own and others' literalisms – more traditionally, recognise and see through *mithyā dr̥ṣṭi* or wrong views. But it is also experiential. One needs to be able to tell in the moment itself the difference between what one is actually experiencing and one's interpretation of it – between what is really going on and the stories we tell ourselves about it. This is the task of mindfulness training. Such training usually begins with mindfulness of the body – or better of bodily sensations (*sparsā* and *vedanā*, in traditional terms). By learning to recognise and accept these sensations fully, we ground ourselves in experience before it is interpreted – before *prapañca* or mental proliferation and interpretive construction arises. This process of noticing what is actually happening can then be extended from bodily sensations to other areas of experience: whether conceived of under the heading of the four *satipaṭṭhānas* or of Sangharakshita's four dimensions of awareness.⁵⁰ On this basis we can allow imagination to unfold without it being seized upon by literalised interpretations of which we are largely unconscious.

Mindfulness does not, however, merely clear the path for imagination by grounding it in uninterpreted experience. As one becomes more mindful in any particular field, what one experiences is revealed in increasing imaginative richness and depth. Thus, when one becomes directly mindful of particular bodily sensations they are discovered to be more and more satisfying, subtle, and engaging. Mindfulness itself becomes imagination. Thus practices such as the Mindfulness of Breathing or the

Development of Metta or Loving-kindness take one deeper and deeper into the world of imagination. One begins by concentrating either on the sensations of breathing or the desire for the well-being of self and others, however, the finer and more intense the concentration, the subtler and richer the objects or images of experience reveal themselves to be, and one enters into the imaginative realms of *dhyāna*.⁵¹ This has the effect both of refreshing and cleansing the mind and of freeing up imagination so that it is receptive to the illumination of its images.

Having an intellectual grasp of the nature of things and distinguishing between experience and interpretation do not come easily, especially when such accomplishments go against the grain of culture and threaten cherished habit patterns. A great deal of support and guidance is needed. This comes from others who share one's Dharma aspiration and especially from those who have greater experience and confidence than oneself – it comes from horizontal and vertical *kalyāṇa mitratā* in the context of Sangha.

Not only does Sangha provide the environment for learning these basic skills, it will be a crucible of the imagination. Within the Sangha imagination will be highly valued and widely experienced, so that all can gain confidence in exploring the vast and unknown territories that lie within them and around them. Sangha members will share a common language for their own developing imaginations, forming an imaginative culture that nourishes and uplifts all who engage with it. Friends will help one to express the imaginative life within one. Preceptors, teachers, and *kalyāṇa mitras* will help one to find for oneself images to feed upon that are most readily capable of carrying illumination, distinguishing them from ones that appeal merely to ideology or sentiment.⁵² And they will safeguard one from the various delusions, intoxications, and inflations that literalised imagination inevitably breeds. They will do so by helping one to disentangle the confusions of understanding and emotion that frequently accompany the awakening imagination.

Besides one's own efforts and the imaginative culture of the Sangha, there is a wider context: the context of the Buddha himself and the tradition that has flowed on from him to the present day. One may check one's own imaginative experience against the Buddha's teachings and, if there is any conflict, investigate where one has been mistaken. The most basic level of such checking is by way of the ethical precepts. Whatever the promptings of one's imagination, they should not lead one to act in contravention of the code of non-violence and love that the precepts embody, since they describe the actual behaviour of the Buddha. This is a serious injunction. Religious inspiration can sometimes be used to justify the most inhuman acts of violence and destruction. Even in Buddhism examples can be found of the use of doctrine to excuse actions that surely the Buddha would never have countenanced.⁵³ Although the precepts are often difficult to apply in practice because of the complexity of life, they are nonetheless a fundamental safeguard against any form of delusion, whether divinely inspired or of any other kind.

But the context of the Buddha and his tradition has more to offer our imaginative explorations. By referring one's own experience to that of the Buddha and his many inspired disciples one can gain encouragement, validation, and an enlarged perspective for one's own imaginative journey. By continuously Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as presented by one's own teachers and practised within one's own Sangha one will safely and beneficially discover the infinite skies of imagination within which one will encounter the Buddha.

The context for the unfolding imagination is crucial if one is not to lose one's way or give up and compromise with the conventional world – the world of mere fancy. But, once one enters the Stream of the Dharma, once imagination is permanently illumined, no illusions can hold one back and imagination unfolds spontaneously and naturally in accordance with *Dharma niyāma* conditionality. One need not consciously seek out or create a context because the context will spontaneously grow in and around one.

Before that glad time, our task is to create together a new imaginative culture by taking our imaginations seriously and working to unfold them more and more fully. In doing this we will find that the world around us vibrates with us and that our own efforts are mirrored in the life of all things. We will discover creative depths within our own culture from which new works will arise expressive of the Dharma's timeless spirit. And we will find the Buddha, appearing to us in a form that is deeply familiar yet resonant of an infinite mystery that one day we may understand.

*Oh, we must weep
And beg the stars
Descend into our hearts
And make us
Glad forever;*

*Yet they will not obey
Unless we ourselves
Make of our bones a ladder
And climb, lovingly,
Up to them.*

*Bodhgaya,
25th November 2010*

- 1 See Sangharakshita, *The Priceless Jewel*, 'The Journey to Il Convento', p.63.
- 2 See a number of articles in *The Priceless Jewel*, and Sangharakshita, *From Genesis to the Diamond Sutra*.
- 3 For a thorough account of this process as it took place in England, see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.
- 4 See Dr B. R. Ambedkar, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*.
- 5 A crore is ten million in contemporary Indian languages – including Indian English!
- 6 *Dr Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3, 'Schemes of Books', No.3 'Symbols of Hinduism': The first chapter was to be, 'Symbols represent the Soul of a Thing', and a further chapter was to be headed, 'Symbols of Buddhism'.
- 7 Dr B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Bk IV, Pt 1, Para. 6: 'Mere morality is not enough; it must be sacred and universal'.
- 8 See especially Sangharakshita, *The Religion of Art*, many of the essays in *The Priceless Jewel* and *Alternative Traditions*. See also my *Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*, Ch. 10.
- 9 *Revering and Relying Upon the Dharma*, p. 19.
- 10 See Sangharakshita, *Alternative Traditions*, 'Buddhism and William Blake'.
- 11 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, I, Ch. 13, pp. 304-5.
- 12 Mentioned in a letter to his brother, 21st December, 1817: '...Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'. It is perhaps significant that Dr Ambedkar's teacher and mentor at Columbia University, the Pragmatist Philosopher, John Dewey, refers to Keats' notion as an influence on his own thought: John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, Penguin (2005):33-4. It is also interesting to consider that negative capability is what one needs to cultivate in order to 'just sit'. It should however be clearly noted that the receptive attitude of 'negative capability' is exercised in the context of *karmic* effort. Mere listlessness, passivity, and drifting are not receptivity. A great deal of effort is required to experience something worth being receptive to.
- 13 *Revering and Relying Upon the Dharma*, p. 10.
- 14 The laws of identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle: A equals A; A does not equal not A; either A or not A.
- 15 This term was used by a Japanese philosopher of the Kyoto school, but Sangharakshita says that he is investing it with a significantly different meaning and therefore sees no value in tracking down the original reference.
- 16 H. Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of 'As If'*. There is a very useful summary of his main argument in Bryan Magee, *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer*, pp. 301-5.
- 17 This recalls Wittgenstein's late philosophy, rejecting his earlier 'picture theory of meaning' and discussing meaning as concerned with the 'putting to work of a tool'.
- 18 Sangharakshita, *Living with Awareness*, p. 62.
- 19 *Udāna*, IV,v, trans. F. L. Woodward, *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*, Part II. See also *Udāna*, II,iii, for his concern with kindness to animals, in this case a snake.
- 20 References are to be found throughout the Pali Canon, but *Udāna* affords many examples.
- 21 Sangharakshita, *Complete Poems 1941-1994*, p. 135.
- 22 Sangharakshita recalls, for instance, seeing stones in an exhibition of Tantric art in London; they were oval in shape and very smooth, having been formed in river beds, and it seemed as if a powerful 'vibration' emanated from them.
- 23 See Subhuti with Subhamati, *Buddhism and Friendship*.
- 24 P. B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*.
- 25 Sangharakshita, *The Religion of Art*, p. 121.
- 26 MN10, *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and MN137, *Saḷāyatanavibhaṅga Sutta*.
- 27 It is interesting to note that this is true of much that might be considered compatible with or even a vehicle for the Dharma life. I have been struck by the usefulness of the training in human communication given in the system known as Non Violent Communication (usually referred to as NVC), which aims to develop skilful communication in the context of empathy for others. But without the clarity of *samyag dṛṣṭi* and the practice of ethics it can easily be abused – and, in my personal observation, frequently is.
- 28 This was established by Dharmachari Padmaraja, who has since left the Order, but whose name deserves remembrance and gratitude for a significant achievement, yet to be bettered.
- 29 *The Greater Mandala*, Mitrata 16, December 1977.
- 30 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard, p. 55.
- 31 This is a point worth dwelling on. Many who have had some 'spiritual' experience use the language of God, because it lies readily to hand. When one denies the existence of God, especially if one does it as vehemently as I have certainly done in the past, one appears to deny something that they have actually experienced and that is very important to them. This point applies more generally. Often people use very imprecise and problematic language to talk about what may be something genuine and deeply meaningful to them. One needs somehow to affirm the experience and its significance, whilst suggesting a less problematic interpretation.
- 32 Perhaps this is the significance of Ratnasambhava's Wisdom of Equality, which is why Sangharakshita has referred to him as the 'Buddha of Beauty'.
- 33 Sangharakshita has suggested that this is what is meant by *Mahāmudra*, the 'Great Symbol'.
- 34 The sacred island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland, is apparently spoken of in this way.
- 35 See Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels*, Part 1, section 5. See also the discussion in my companion paper, *Revering and Relying upon the Dharma*, p.19.

36 SN I,6,2. See my companion paper, *Revering and Relying Upon the Dharma*, p. 18, for a fuller exploration of this point.

37 For instance, we find Sariputta doing so at SN V,48,58.

38 Sangharakshita, *The Meaning of Orthodoxy in Buddhism*.

39 See Michael K. Jerryson & Mark Juergensmeyer, eds, *Buddhism and Warfare*, for the disastrous misuses of the *sūnyatā* doctrine.

40 I once asked Sangharakshita whether contemplation of the image of Apollo could lead to Enlightenment – could be illumined. He replied that theoretically it could, but that it might take a very long time. I asked how long and he replied, 'Many millennia, even *kalpas* – if at all!'

There is perhaps here some possible ambiguity in the terminology used within the Triratna Buddhist Community, stemming from Sangharakshita's own usages, that may complicate the issue. He sometimes speaks, as I have done in this paper, of the visionary Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that appeared especially in the Mahayana phase of development as 'archetypal', even as the 'archetypes of Enlightenment'. This term is also found in the Analytical Psychology of C. G. Jung, who spoke of deep patterns in what he termed the collective unconscious of humanity that find endlessly varying expression in dreams, visions, art, and in pathological delusions. The forms might vary, but the themes remain constant.

Sangharakshita, however, means something rather different by 'archetypal', although there is clearly a connection with Jung's usage. The 'archetypal' Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are expressions of Enlightenment, not merely of primal patterns in the mind of humanity – although Enlightenment itself could be seen as a particular expression of one or more such archetypes of the collective unconscious. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas found especially in the Mahayana express illumination and their contemplation may lead to illumination, while all that is archetypal in the Jungian sense is certainly not illumined or illuminable.

When we speak of 'archetypes of Enlightenment', what archetype means is something more like idealised or imaginative, belonging to a 'visionary' dimension – although not necessarily a visual one. They are stripped of all historical attributes, although these are sometimes read back into them, as when Nepalese Buddhists tell that the Kathmandu valley was made with a sweep of Manjushri's sword. Whether or not the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas originated in any historical figures, they have come to be hypostatisations or embodiments of the Enlightenment we know of through the Buddha Shakyamuni, drawing out its inner nature and allowing us to come into relationship with it, so that we too may be illumined.

41 F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, see Robert G. Morrison (Dharmachari Sagaramati), *Nietzsche and Buddhism*.

42 Sangharakshita, *The History of My Going for Refuge*. See also my *Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*, Ch. 4.

43 I believe a great deal more could very usefully be made of the symbolism and ritual of shrine-rooms as a principal way of initiating an imaginative connection with the Buddha. The origins of the Buddha image seem to have been in the invocation of his presence so that one felt one was actually dwelling with him. The shrine hall is often people's first imaginative contact with the Buddha.

Similarly, I have come to think that we could make much more of bowing – indeed could have much more of a real bow. In TBM in the West shrine-room etiquette dictates a mere bend from the waist on entering and leaving, whereas in India the practice is to touch one's head to the floor before the image – as is common throughout the Buddhist world. I have long felt that the former rather meagre gesture deprives us of a very powerful and effective ritual that encourages a sense of the Buddha as completely transcending us and a deep gratitude and devotion to him.

44 DN16;5,8-12: *Long Discourses of the Buddha*, trans. Maurice Walshe.

45 Sangharakshita, *A Guide to the Buddhist Path*.

46 In traditional terms, the *samāyāsattva* becomes the vehicle for the *jñānasattva*. The *samāyāsattva* or 'oath-bound being' is the image we construct in our imaginations; the mental picture we paint of the Buddha or Bodhisattva. The *jñānasattva* is illumined by the Dharma, which 'descends' into the uplifted *samāyāsattva*.

47 Ordination within the Triratna Buddhist Order has two parts, one in private, with only the ordinand and his or her Private Preceptor present, and one in public, often with others also being ordained, conducted by the Public Preceptor. The Private and Public ceremonies both consist principally of the recitation of the Refuges and Precepts, but the Private ceremony also contains initiation into an imaginative connection with Bodhi, until recently in the form of a Buddha or Bodhisattva drawn from traditional sources, although Sangharakshita now wants us to take a more radical approach, as this paper outlines.

48 DN1.

49 Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, Ch. 1, IX.

50 See Sangharakshita, *The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path*, 'Perfect Awareness'.

51 Traditionally each of the *dhyānas* is equated with a particular god-realm, each successively subtler than the one that precedes it. Each, in other words, corresponds to a more subtle dimension of imaginative or visionary experience.

52 For instance, Sangharakshita is very cautious about the nature of the interest some women have in choosing at ordination female Buddhas or Bodhisattvas to meditate upon, on the grounds that they share the same female form. Because such choices are sometimes based on the superficial motivations of sentiment or ideology they do not touch the deeper imagination and therefore cannot be a basis for illumination. Similarly superficial choices often lie behind attraction to wrathful or demonic figures – and indeed even at times to the more 'standard' forms: for instance, liking Manjushri because of his 'manly' sword-wielding. We are often not deep enough as individuals to

know how to choose. Most people are therefore better off, he believes, trying to relate more closely to the historical Buddha – and seeing what arises from that. Needless to say, he is far from saying that all who chose to meditate on female figures are doing so for superficial reasons.

53 See note 36 above.