

**REVERING AND RELYING UPON THE DHARMA:
Sangharakshita's approach to Right View.
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“What is our fundamental philosophical position?”, mused Sangharakshita during a meeting of senior members of the Triratna Order in the 1980's. I was struck by his reflective tone – and the fact that he gave no answer: this was work in progress.

Without interrogating the notion 'fundamental philosophical position' too closely, it broadly corresponds in this context to the Buddhist term '*samyag-dr̥ṣṭi*' or 'Right View' – 'Perfect Vision' in Sangharakshita's translation. Over his many years of teaching, Sangharakshita has expounded Right View in many ways, using the terminology and perspectives of a wide range of historical Buddhist schools and translating key terms variously, borrowing from the philosophical, psychological, poetic, and even religious vocabulary of the West. He has also formed his own distinctive language for communicating the Buddha's view of life, in such phrases as the 'Higher Evolution' or the 'Cosmic Going for Refuge'. The remarkable richness and diversity of what he has said and written is certainly, besides its luminous clarity, one of the most attractive features of the Triratna Community, the movement he has founded, giving it a particularly broad appeal and deep scope. However, it also leaves potential problems. Consistency may indeed be a foolish hobgoblin, but inconsistency can lead to misunderstanding and confusion.

We need to consider the whole grand sweep of Sangharakshita's presentation carefully if we are to discern a fundamental philosophical position. But this is not an easy task. While carrying it out, there are two main points to be born in mind, because they account for some of the apparent inconsistency.

First, his exposition of one or other Buddhist tradition should not necessarily be taken for approval of it. He has often found himself elucidating teachings so that his disciples can appreciate the Buddhist background from which they have sprung. In doing so, he has engaged his considerable powers of empathy with those points of view and has tried to understand them on their own terms, thereby helping us get inside them.¹ Indeed, I have heard him do the same for works of literature and even for the doctrines of other religions. However, his making intelligible an aspect of the Buddhist tradition, even revealing its spiritual efficacy, does not necessarily mean that he considers it useful in its own right or that it should become part of the Triratna Community's currency.²

Second, we must take into account Sangharakshita's own development as a practitioner and as a teacher. Throughout his life he has been deepening his understanding of the Dharma and clarifying his expression of it. Although there is striking continuity in his understanding from his earliest writings to the present day, there is nonetheless a discernible evolution over time: it is possible to recognise the gradual emergence of an integral core that is distinctive to him. Sangharakshita has himself described the unfolding of the core of that core in his *The History of My Going for Refuge*, and similar development can be seen elsewhere.

We must then always read his earlier teachings in the light of his later. This does not by any means require us to discard his earlier material – for instance, burning any book in which he uses terminology borrowed from the German Idealists, like 'The Absolute', which he now

eschews. Nor yet does it require us to cut out the entire Mahayana, because he now finds some of its metaphysicising problematically reified, despite his earlier use of it. What it implies is that we should have a good understanding of his most recent perspective when we look at his earlier work and read or listen to it accordingly. And, of course, his disciples should take great care in how they themselves use that earlier material in their own practice. When they teach the Dharma they should ensure that the basic position is clear and, if they choose to refer to other, more ambiguous material, they should make it obvious that they are doing so for particular purposes.

Even when all this is taken into account, Sangharakshita's question of thirty or so years ago still requires an answer. What is the Triratna Community's fundamental philosophical position? Insofar as the movement is founded upon Sangharakshita's particular presentation of the Dharma, that requires us to know his fundamental philosophical position. What are we to make of his various ways of speaking about Right View, whether those derived from tradition or of his own coinage? I have been especially concerned that those of us who are his disciples hear something definitive from him about such problematic terms as 'The Absolute', 'The Unconditioned', 'The Transcendental', etc., as well as 'Cosmic Going for Refuge' etc. So in March this year I had a series of conversations with him in which we discussed his latest thinking about these matters.

I recorded our sessions, intending to transcribe and edit them, however Sangharakshita preferred that I should write them up in my own words, since the topic requires a greater precision than he can martial in a spoken exchange - the deterioration of his sight not permitting him to commit his thought to paper himself. This I have done in what follows. I have tried to expound what Sangharakshita said to me at that time, not only on the basis of what he then said but also what I have found elsewhere in his work that seems relevant, and I have expanded upon his thought in my own words. What I have written has been carefully checked by Sangharakshita and can be taken as accurately representing his thought – as accurately as is possible in another's words and style.

The Importance of Views

Before proceeding further, I want to make clear why this task is necessary. It is necessary because views matter. But, first, what are views? Essentially they are ways in which we organise and interpret the raw data of our experience. Our senses, outer and inner, deliver us an undifferentiated mass of impressions, which must be reduced to some manageable order if we are to live at all successfully. The first step in creating cosmos out of chaos is the labelling and categorising of our perceptions so that the world becomes an assemblage of recognisable elements: this is *saṃjñā*, 'interpretation' or 'recognition', in its most basic function. Evidently this primary ordering is in part instinctual: animals too are able to differentiate eatable and uneatable, threat and herd member, own territory and rival's land. However, the ability to apply words and concepts greatly extends the subtlety and range of *saṃjñā*.

Language also brings something more: *vitarka*, the capacity to think, even to reason, to whatever extent we may use it. We can stand back from experience and consider how the elements of what we perceive are related to each other – and above all we can think about ourselves in relation to them. The patterns we form by that thinking are our views. They may find expression in more or less clearly articulated theories and ideas, but most often they are

not formulated in a conscious way at all and are simply unthought-out attitudes and assumptions that are carried in our mental processes without us being aware of them.

Views may be immediate theories about particular situations or they may extend to fundamental questions of the meaning and purpose of human existence and the nature of reality itself. Actually all self-conscious individuals who have not realised the Dharma directly for themselves carry implicit views about their own self-hood and about life itself, however dim, contradictory, and muddled their ideas may be.

Our views are, of course, not disinterested. They arise out of our affectively tinged experience and in support of the fundamental struggle to avoid what we disdain and to gain and perpetuate what we value – pain and pleasure being the most basic categories of evaluation. In part, views are analyses of the situation we find ourselves in: explaining why pain or pleasure have arisen. In part, they are strategies for acting from that situation: explaining how we may further what we value in future. Most often, according to the Buddha, they are over-hasty generalisations from our experience.³ They appear to serve our best interests, but often in fact only bring us future suffering.

Having constructed views to deal with our experience to what we suppose is our best advantage, we then become attached to them. That is because they themselves are often strongly connected with feelings of pleasure or pain. We get a sense of relief or satisfaction when we have a view about things, because we have 'mastered' the situation in thought and now know what to do.

Views can, of course, be 'right' or 'wrong' – no doubt with various shades in between. To distinguish the one from the other, we need to consider three things: the accuracy and balance of the data, the values that are being served, and the outcome. Right View attends to the data as a whole: it gives *yoniso manasikāra*, 'wise attention', taking in all the information, pleasant, painful and neutral and seeing it as it is in fullness and depth. It stays close to the essential experience, recognising it as sharing the characteristics of all things: impermanence, insubstantiality, and inability to give permanent satisfaction, but offering always a gateway to liberation. Right View serves the highest and greatest possible good: progress on the Path towards the ultimate liberation of all. Finally, views can be judged as Right when they result in actions that are beneficial to self and others in accordance with the precepts.

Wrong views build on selective or one-sided interpretations of experience, distorted information that is not seen in its roundness or depth. We pick certain characteristics of things and leave out others, choosing what pleases us – even though perversely that may sometimes be the unpleasant aspects of things or especially of people. Wrong views serve narrow, coarse, selfish ends and they result in suffering for the agent and for others.

According to the Buddha, there are two kinds of fundamental wrong view: eternalist and nihilist. Both arise from breaking up the undifferentiated flow of experience, with its appearance of things coming into being and passing away, and emphasising one aspect at the expense of another. Eternalism consists in emphasising the fact that things appear to arise or come into being. We abstract that arising and generalise it into a view of ultimate, eternal realities. Nihilism is the result of abstracting from the fact that things appear to cease and building a theory of the ultimate vacuity of reality, its essential valuelessness and lack of

meaning and purpose.⁴

Both have consequences in action. There are so many forms of each that it is not possible to reduce the results to as neat equations as is often done in expositions of the Dharma. However, eternalism may result in self-denial of a destructive kind and it leads especially to the denial of personal moral sensitivity and in inhuman acts that are justified as the commands of an eternal principle of some kind – various forms of theistic belief are the characteristic examples of eternalism. Nihilism very often leads to an absorption in a very narrow pursuit of pleasure and a carelessness about or denial of moral values – one could say that consumerism is a modern nihilistic construction.

Right View does not promote either attachment to the reified abstractions of eternalism or to the lack of value, order, and meaning of nihilism. Rather it brings us back to what can be clearly seen in experience, whether of what is happening to and in us at any particular moment or of what we know from those we have found to be wise.

It should by now be obvious that it does matter, and matter very much, what views we hold. Integrity and good intentions are not enough: an intelligent understanding that accords with the ways things truly are is essential. The ideas we have about life, the attitudes we have to our experience, all shape the way we act for good or for evil. The long experience of mankind amply demonstrates that ideas really do count: we can see, for example, the terrible inhumanity that flowed from views in the twentieth century, whether fascist, communist, or colonialist. Much of the danger in the world today stems from the confrontation in the Middle East between incompatible views: Islamic, Jewish, Christian, Socialist, Neo-Conservative, Liberal and so forth.

Of course, views have been the basis for much good in the world, too, and today we must hope and work for the triumph of humanitarian views of all kinds. Considering the enormous destructive potential of modern technology, one could say that the survival of the world today depends upon the widespread influence of more helpful views about the nature of this life, humanity's meaning and purpose, and the responsibility that one human being has to another – and to other beings too.

Views matter because they shape our ethical lives; they also shape spiritual or religious life, in the broadest sense. Genuine spiritual growth is a possibility within life itself and can be witnessed among some followers of most religions – and of no religion, especially within the fields of art and philosophy. The problem is that, in so many cases, religions distort human growth because of their way of understanding life – because of their views, especially of the eternalist variety. It is very significant that, in the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, the Buddha's classic statement on the subject, a majority of the sixty-four wrong views enumerated are misinterpretations of visionary and meditative experience: views sidetrack higher experience and prevent it from leading to liberation.⁵

What is distinctive about Buddhism is its definitive clarity about the Path and the goal to which it is directed. The Buddha saw very clearly indeed the danger of views and the necessity of maintaining a sharp awareness of the way we think and talk about our lives, our efforts on the path, and especially our understanding of the true nature of things. The Pali texts show him to be ever alert for ideas that are harmful, or at least not helpful, whether to

ethical life or the attainment of liberation. It is very striking that the *Brahmajāla-sutta* is the first sutta of the first *nikāya* of the first *piṭaka* of the *Tipiṭaka*. Wrong views lead to a distortion of human experience and, at best, prevent genuine spiritual aspiration achieving its full flowering, at worst they lead to all the evils of which human beings are capable.

Until we have seen things directly as they are, we rely upon Right Views for our practice of the Dharma. This is why study is such an important aspect of Dharma practice. We need to clear our minds of the wrong views, whether eternalist or nihilist in any of their many forms and sub-species, that make up so much of our thought and attitudes. This requires us to do quite a bit of self-examination, especially through study and discussion of the Dharma with those clearer than ourselves.⁶ At the same time, we must acquire Right Views, the set of ideas about things that direct us back to how they really are and teach us first to live in harmony with others and ourselves, through ethics and meditation, and then, through Wisdom, to gain liberation from suffering.

The Buddha's 'metaphysical reticence'

The Buddha rigorously resisted all wrong views, seeing them as a 'thicket, a jungle, a tangle' in which one can easily get lost. He taught Right View as the first limb of his most basic presentation of the Path: the Noble Eightfold Path. However he was not teaching philosophy, despite what Sangharakshita says of him in his early paper *Philosophy and Religion in Original and Developed Buddhism* - at least not speculative philosophy: if he could be described as a philosopher at all, it would be as an empirical one. He was not concerned to provide a comprehensive, rationally derived account of reality or an explanation of how and why it worked. He considered that to be a distraction from the real task. In some places, he speaks of having no view, in the sense of not holding onto a preconceived philosophical position.⁷ He saw the way things are directly by his Wisdom and did not require any position from which to evaluate them. He was a thinker, however, reflecting deeply on his own experience of suffering and pointing out what it was necessary for us to know in order to get free from it.

The Buddha's thought represented a complete break from that of his contemporaries and those who preceded him in India. His teaching was quite foreign to the general Indian mentality and mode of expression, both before and after his time. Of course, he had to address some of the principal concerns of his times and to express himself in a common stock of terminology. But he rejected the speculative and metaphysical trends common in that age. He famously refused to answer four metaphysical problems posed by the wanderer Vacchagotta, dismissing them as unprofitable for gaining liberation from suffering.⁸

The Buddha scrupulously avoided all metaphysical abstraction in his presentation of the Dharma – this has been referred to as his 'metaphysical reticence'. Where he has been interpreted as abstracting (e.g. the 'unborn' of the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta*⁹), it is plain that he is being poetic and should not be taken philosophically. However, it did not take long for the Indian tendency to highly abstract thought to be brought to bear on his teaching. The Dharma theory of the *Abhidharma* was the first move and later Mahayana thinkers went far further, culminating in the *Tathāgatagarbha* doctrine, with all its rich variety of forms and interpretations, some of them very complex indeed.

Those who developed such theoretical approaches may have been, in their own context and experience, making good sense of the teachings and practices they inherited to deal with problems they faced, especially those posed by Brahminical challengers; they may have been fully faithful to the spirit of the Dharma. It is possible, as Sangharakshita himself has done, to make very good and inspiring spiritual sense of some of these metaphysical constructions. However, they betray the Buddha's fundamental method – and one might say his method was itself a principal aspect of his teaching: the way the Buddha talked was as significant as what he said. This implies a fourth criterion for Right View, besides what is mentioned above: the accuracy and balance of the data, the values that are being served, and the ethical outcome. We must also consider the effect of the language we use: does it communicate either an eternalist or nihilist impression? Sangharakshita believes that quite a lot of terms used throughout the Buddhist tradition fail this test.

Sangharakshita acknowledges that he himself has employed a number of apparently metaphysical terms in his own presentations: 'The Absolute' being the most egregious example.¹⁰ The problem is that inevitably one hears or reads terms like 'The Absolute', 'The Unconditioned', 'The Transcendental', 'The Non-dual', 'Buddha Nature', especially when capitalised, as referring to some reified metaphysical entity, real, but existing somehow apart from what can be experienced. They easily lead into views, species of eternalism, and those views will then provide the basis for action, which will easily become unskillful, since they are not in tune with the ways things truly are. Such quasi-philosophical or metaphysical terminology is to be avoided, especially in our general teaching. It should only be used where it is genuinely helpful and one can make very clear indeed that one is speaking in an entirely poetic, metaphorical, or imaginative sense – which is not easy to be sure of one's hearers having caught, however luminous one's own understanding.

In general, Sangharakshita says, the more abstract the mode of expression the less authentic it is in expressing the Buddha's teaching, and the more concrete the more authentic. If we have to engage much mental gymnastics to make it clear that such abstractions do not refer to ontological realities, our suspicions should be aroused and we should be very wary of using them. When we read or hear terms of this kind in Sangharakshita's own work, we need to be aware of what he is intending: an imaginative or poetic evocation of the goal of the Dharma life. And perhaps we should be very cautious about imitating him in this particular way. We should stray no further into speculation than is strictly necessary for real practice of the Dharma. This was the Buddha's own direct example to us.

The danger of nihilism

The danger so far mentioned is at the eternalist end of the wrong-view spectrum. However, nihilism is as much of a danger – and perhaps a worse one in our times. How do we convey a sense of deeper meaning and purpose to life, of something that goes beyond our present range, without of course 'something' seeming to refer to a supra-experiential reality? How do we keep before us a 'transcendental object', in Sangharakshita's perhaps dangerous phrase: a higher goal of our spiritual efforts? It is essential for us to conceive and imagine such a goal, for the Dharma life is lived to go beyond what we now are. If we do not have that image before us, we cannot direct our energies to practising the Dharma. In our eagerness to avoid eternalism, we must beware of falling into nihilism. But how are we to avoid it? What then is it to which we are going beyond what we now are? How are we to talk about that?

There is not only the problem of where we are going: how are we going to get there? The Dharma life takes us beyond our narrow self-identity and its egoistically based motivations. What then is it that takes over from our normal drives, however benign? Unless one has already some abiding experience of that goal and that supra-selfish motivation, one needs a way of keeping them in mind, allowing them a convincing and inspiring presence in one's life, and aligning one's actions with them. One needs to be able to refer to and have confidence in goal and supra-selfish motive force so they can shape one's choices in accordance with the Dharma – one needs increasingly to sense a direction towards which one is drawn and a deeper energy that carries one to it. But how can one refer to these without suggesting a something metaphysical that truly exists?

Sangharakshita's experience of the goal and of Dharmic motivation

For Sangharakshita himself this never seems to have been a problem. From his first contact with it, the Dharma made a direct and vivid impact upon him and within him. Reading the Diamond Sutra at the age of 16, he experienced 'something ineffable' that he 'at once joyfully embraced with an unqualified acceptance and assent'. This released in him a fountain of joyous energy and gave him a sense of unbounded freedom. From then on, he was drawn forward, never doubting the direction he was taking. Increasingly he experienced a motivation arising within him that transcended himself: from the Bodhisattva Ideal, from his visualisation of Tara, Manjusri and other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

He had a particularly powerful experience of this supra-personal motivation after he arrived in Nagpur on 6th December 1956 to learn of Dr Ambedkar's death. He experienced himself responding entirely spontaneously to the crisis faced by the new Buddhists, bereft of their revered leader - responding with deep inspiration and great effectiveness, as if something from far beyond him was working through him. He says that, while he was giving lecture after lecture over a number of days without rest, it didn't feel as if it was him speaking. Sometimes he would not know what he was saying, 'The words would just come out of my mouth, and I would hear them almost as if I was listening to another person; they were not preceded by thought'.

Later, when he was lecturing in Britain, he quite often felt that at a certain point in the talk something took over that was more than him. In a similar vein, he later speaks of the Triratna Order having been founded through him, rather than him founding the Order. Looking back and reflecting on his life as a whole it does seem to him that he has been driven by a wind from far beyond himself.

Sangharakshita's fundamental 'philosophical' perspective

These experiences have helped Sangharakshita make sense of the Buddha's teaching and have fuelled his contemplation of it, especially in the form of reflections on Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels, the 'spiral path', the nature of Stream Entry and the *bodhicitta*, leading on to ideas about the Lower and Higher Evolution. He has arrived thereby at his own particular presentation of Right View.

For him, as for the Buddha, the fundamental expression of Right View is *pratītya-samutpāda*,

which is in a sense no view at all¹¹: it is not a theory about things but a description of what we actually can see and know about all elements of our experience. It is the middle way between eternalism and nihilism. It avoids eternalism because all is dependently arising and therefore impermanent; it avoids nihilism because it contains the possibility of a path of self-transcendence.

In its classic statement, the Buddha's fundamental insight points out that any aspect of experience we choose to examine can be seen to arise in dependence on conditions and, those conditions ceasing, itself to cease. Much follows from this. Most notably, conditionality entails, and is entailed by, the three *lakṣaṇas*: what is conditioned cannot be permanent, cannot have substantial existence, and cannot offer abiding satisfaction. But conditionality implies also a dynamic interrelationship of all things, inner and outer. There is not merely a coincidental procession of otherwise independent, impermanent, insubstantial events. There is a connection between one event and what follows it. One set of events *conditions* another. From this set of events, just that set of events must emerge.

The fact of conditionality requires no theory about the precise mechanism whereby conditions and conditioned are related. It is simply what we can observe happening all around us and within us: it is just the way things really are. There is regularity or order to the chain of events. All is ordered or regulated, in the sense that, broadly speaking, from the same conditions the same effects will emerge.

Pratītya-samutpāda is, from this point of view, the general principle of ordered relationship between conditions and their effects. That principle is expressed in a vast, perhaps infinite, number of possible laws that govern the relationship between particular conditions and what they condition – although the metaphor of 'law' and 'government' here certainly implies no external agency or law maker. For instance, the 'law of gravity' simply describes a predictable regularity in the relationship between any possible larger and smaller body. It is this ordered nature of things that enables us to function in relation to them – if there was no such order, life would not be possible.

Although the fact of *pratītya-samutpāda* is fundamental to our survival in the most basic sense, its importance for Dharma life is more specific. Our ability to find liberation from suffering depends upon *pratītya-samutpāda*, not merely in that fully understanding the principle is liberation, but that liberation is possible because there are regularities or laws within the overall pattern of *pratītya-samutpāda* that make it so. Once we have understood and are fully convinced about the nature of reality as *pratītya-samutpāda*, we align ourselves with those regularities or laws that lead us to liberation. Liberation too arises in dependence on conditions - there are regularities that govern spiritual growth and fulfilment.

The Five Niyāmas

To understand this further, we need to look at the variety of conditioned relationship. In the suttas the Buddha refers to a range of different kinds, but these are never clearly classified. That task was undertaken later and was recorded by Buddhaghosa in his commentaries on the *Tiṭṭaka*.¹² Buddhaghosa set out five *niyāmas* under which all conditioned relationships can be grouped. *Niyāma* means 'restraint', 'limitation', or 'necessity' and, in this context, refers to categories of necessary relationship within the principle of conditionality – the five different

classes or orders of regularities by which conditioned is bound to conditions.

This classification has had a major influence on Sangharakshita's understanding and presentation of *pratītya-samutpāda*, although he has given it his own interpretation, in certain respects different from that found in the commentaries and especially of modern understandings of them.¹³ In his exposition of the *niyāmas*, he uses modern concepts not found in ancient India to expound the five categories and he gives some of them rather different meanings from what is found in the sources. He probably does this on the basis of Mrs Rhys Davids' interpretation. It is important to acknowledge that what we are left with is a teaching that is sufficiently different to be regarded in some respects as new, although based on the essential principle, found in Buddhaghosa, that conditionality as a whole comprises different 'orders'. Sangharakshita's analysis is, however, not at all inconsistent with the teaching of the Buddha as found in the Suttas – and, it must be said, what appears to be the import of the commentaries themselves.

Although much of the ground is quite familiar, it is worth recounting the teaching as a whole as Sangharakshita understands it, so that its full significance as an exposition of what is the middle way between eternalism and nihilism is made plain. It is also worth spelling out so that it can be seen in the context of Sangharakshita's overall presentation of the Dharma.

Pratītya-samutpāda means that there are discernible patterns of regularity between conditions and what they condition. These patterns of regularity can be grouped into five categories – the five *niyāmas*: *utu*, *bīja*, *mano*, *kamma*, and *dhamma*.

Utu-niyāma is the sum total of the regularities found in physical inorganic matter – the subject matter of the sciences of physics and chemistry – the conditions that govern the Mineral Kingdom. It includes the law of gravity, the laws of thermodynamics, the laws governing chemical reactions, electricity, the structure of atoms, etc.

Bīja-niyāma is made up of all the conditioned relationships that pertain to living organisms – the Vegetable or Plant Kingdom, the subject matter of biology, botany, and physiology. Examples of *bīja niyāma* conditionality are photosynthesis, genetic inheritance, the circulation of the blood.

Mano-niyāma is the sum of regularities that order the Animal Kingdom, made up of all organisms that have sensory perception, studied by zoology and much of behavioural science. Here are found the processes of perception, reflexes and stimulus-response reactions, and instincts. Included may be very complex and intelligent responses, such as remarkable migratory instincts and survival strategies of apparently great cunning.

These three *niyāmas* all operate in us: regularities of conditioned relationships under these three headings govern our bodies and our sensory and instinctual intelligence. It is within these *niyāmas* that what Sangharakshita calls the 'Lower Evolution' takes place. The remaining two *niyāmas* are what make the 'Higher Evolution' possible.

Kamma-niyāma conditionality comes into play once intelligence becomes self-reflexive, capable of forming an idea of self as a centre of action and experience. It consists of those regularities that are found in the relationship between the self-conscious agent and the effects

of his or her actions, whether of body, speech, or mind. The effects that emerge under this *niyāma* are of two kinds: external and internal. While it is more difficult to be certain whether or not something that happens to one is the result of one's past actions under the *kamma-niyāma*, it is relatively easy to observe the way our actions reshape the mind as it re-arises from moment to moment in this life – if not the way it re-arises from life to life¹⁴.

Kamma-niyāma is the arena of ethics. Actions that are based upon skilful or helpful states of mind broadly tend to bring beneficial effects in the world, pleasant feedback from one's surroundings, and a greater degree of inner satisfaction and fulfilment and a deeper and enriched experience. Of course, unhelpful actions have the opposite effect, in accordance with the karmic order of conditionality. Ethics consists in according one's actions with the way things are. Ethics is natural: what makes an action ethical or unethical is inherent in the nature of things. Reality is inherently ethical.

The *dhamma-niyāma* is presented in the source commentaries as accounting for such matters as why a 'world-earthquake' takes place at each of the major stages in any Buddha's career. More recent Theravadin discussions seem to understand it as the fundamental principle of conditionality itself, inclusive of the others or as a sort of miscellaneous category to take care of whatever doesn't fit elsewhere.¹⁵ Sangharakshita however reads much more specific meaning into it. The *dhamma-niyāma* comprises those conditioned processes by means of which Buddhas arise. These processes are represented especially by the sequence of 'positive' factors that arise at Stream Entry. It is, one might say, the stream that one enters.

Buddhahood is not a random event, nor is it given: it is gained by establishing a sequence of conditions, each succeeding one arising out of the preceding in accordance with *pratītya-samutpāda*. One attains Bodhi by exploiting regularities inherent in reality: the capacity for Enlightenment is part of the way things are.

The cyclic and progressive directions within conditionality

The *niyāmas* categorise all possible regularities of conditioned relationship and arrange them in a hierarchy of the degrees of consciousness that they support, from inorganic non-consciousness through to the fully Enlightened mind – from those under *utu-niyāma* to those under *dhamma-niyāma*. However, each is not a discrete system, but is interrelated with the others in many complex ways. Most significantly, processes within one *niyāma* may give rise to processes within another. Movement is possible from a lower to a higher – and indeed from a higher to a lower. We can thus distinguish two trends within *pratītya-samutpāda* as a whole. There are those processes that remain on one level, moving in a constantly renewed cycle: as seen in the cycle of birth and death of any animal species or the formation and wearing away of mountains. And there are those processes that move from one *niyāma* to the next: whether upwards, as when living organisms emerge from a warm soup of amino acids (*bīja-niyāma* processes emerging from those of *utu-niyāma*); or downwards, as when a plant species dies out (*bīja-niyāma* merging back into *utu-niyāma* ones). Sangharakshita speaks of these horizontal and vertical directions within conditionality as a whole as cyclic and progressive (the possibility of progress taken as implying the possibility of regress).

The progressive trend within conditionality has two stages. At first, progression is blind – the organism does not consciously direct its own emergence in more complex and conscious

forms. However, once self-awareness arises, bringing the *kamma-niyāma* into play, deliberate effort must be made if there is to be further progress. This second, conscious stage within the progressive trend Sangharakshita describes as the growth of the creative mind through spiral conditionality.

The emergence of *kamma-niyāma* conditionality, then, marks the transition to conscious development. Progress under the *kamma-niyāma* requires the conscious subordination to ethical awareness of instincts belonging to the *mano-niyāma*. If this does not happen then self-consciousness becomes side-tracked or degenerates, in accordance with the 'reactive' sequence of conditionality that is described in the twelve 'cyclic' *nidānas*. In terms of the traditional schema, this means wandering in the *dugati*, the four 'realms of misery' found in the Tibetan Wheel of Life: hell, *pretaloka*, animal realm, and world of the *asuras*; all of which represent distorted forms of self-consciousness – varieties of evolutionary cul-de-sac.

If ethical awareness does predominate, directing actions of body, speech, and mind in skilful ways, then consciousness emerges in more and more subtle and refined forms, increasingly expanded beyond a narrow self-reference. To complete the correspondence with the six realms schema: one then progresses through the *sugati* - the human and god realms.

The progressive possibility within the *kamma-niyāma* consists in the sequence of steps leading up to Stream Entry, variously described in tradition. In the *trīśikṣā*, it is *śīla* and *samādhi*; in the chain of twelve positive *nidānas*, it is the steps from *śraddhā* up to *samādhi*. As consciousness emerges in more and more sensitive and pure forms, it becomes less and less self-referenced and it is increasingly attuned to the way things truly are. Gradually the tendency to egoistic clinging weakens enough for a new process to come into play: progress in accordance with the *dhamma-niyāma*, beginning with the arising of *prajñā* or *yathābhūta-jñānadarśana*, at Stream Entry, and continuing on to Buddhahood.

This *dhamma-niyāma* process develops naturally in accordance with its own inner dynamic, each stage emerging by inherent momentum at a higher level out of the one that precedes it and it is now irreversible. In the case of the four lower *niyāmas*, all directions are possible: there may be a cycle of conditions or else conditions under the next *niyāma* may emerge – or there may be a degeneration, in which the higher processes disappear. Under the *dhamma-niyāma*, there is only progression from higher state to higher still – the *dhamma-niyāma* is pure progression.

The sequence of conditioned arisings, categorised under the *dhamma-niyāma*, transcends self-consciousness, just as self-consciousness transcends instinctual consciousness, and develops within the individual independent of egoistic volition, spontaneously unfolding in more and more rich and satisfying forms. It is now the chief motive force of the one in whom it flowers, increasingly replacing the old self-referent willing, however refined. There is still a motivation, but it does not come from the individual will and it does not merely serve the interests of that individual. Considered from this point of view, it is the *bodhicitta*, a supra-personal, altruistic motivating force – which is why Sangharakshita translates *bodhicitta* as the 'Will to Enlightenment', drawing out this aspect of its character. It is felt as a will from beyond one's own will, that carries one onward and upward, at this stage, without any personal effort. One's choice, under what remains of *kamma-niyāma*, is to align oneself with it, to cooperate with it.

The niyāmas and evolution, lower and higher

The progressive trend in conditionality runs through all the *niyāmas*. When the appropriate conditions arise within each *niyāma*, processes under the next *niyāma* emerge. Physical and chemical processes of the *utu-niyāma* provide the basis for the emergence of *bīja-niyāma* processes: living organisms are made up of and emerge from physical and chemical processes. Sense awareness and instinct, operating under the *mano-niyāma*, emerge when the organic processes of the *bīja-niyāma* provide the necessary conditions. Sensory awareness and intelligence are the basis from which self-consciousness emerges and the *kamma-niyāma* comes into effect. Conscious ethical growth, in accordance with the *kamma-niyāma*, provides the conditions for the emergence of the self-transcending processes of the *dhamma-niyāma*.

Sangharakshita sees this progression as a continuous sweep, which he connects with the idea of evolution. However, a caution is required here. Sangharakshita's usage does not imply any particular *theory* of evolution, far less any kind of materialist epiphenomenalism: the doctrine that consciousness is simply a bi-product of physiological processes. That, of course, is a view, and a nihilist one at that. We are rescued from views by the Buddha's Right View of *pratītya-samutpāda*, which avoids all theorising about the processes around us and in us. It merely describes what we can observe: regularities that enable us to say, 'In dependence on this, that arises', without begging any question as to why or how.

This theoretical agnosticism – an example of the Buddha's 'metaphysical reticence' - applies as much to what Sangharakshita calls the progressive or spiral order of conditionality as to the merely cyclical or reactive. The emergence of more complex and sensitive processes out of simpler ones, leading to the arising of the self-conscious individual and then to the arising of higher states of consciousness, is one that can be observed in the evidence all around us, if we include the reports of 'the wise'. Why it happens or what drives it is not a question the Buddhist needs to answer. Indeed, an answer would almost certainly not be profitable in terms of the leading of the Dharma life, and would very likely involve mistaken views about things that would hamper or block one's progress on the Path.¹⁶ All we are required to say is that we can observe, directly and by reliable report, regularities in the world around us and within us that do enable a progression from simpler to more complex and sensitive organisms and onward to higher human states, if not further.

Sangharakshita, then, connects the progressive trend in conditionality with the idea of evolution but he does not consider that equation as indispensable to his particular presentation of the Dharma, especially since he is well aware that some people find it off-putting. He makes the connection to take advantage of an idea that is familiar to many people already, giving them a broad image of development, but also to help make more sense of spiritual life by putting it in a wider context. If we can see the progressive trend at work throughout nature, we can recognise the continuity of what we are ourselves attempting to do as Buddhists with what is happening in the life all around us. The process of human development is a natural one.

With that caution firmly in mind, let us see how Sangharakshita connects the idea of evolution with the progressive trend in conditionality and with the *niyāmas*. He speaks of an evolution of consciousness, with four phases:

First, a phase of blind evolution of sense or instinctual consciousness by species, which he calls the Lower Evolution, from *utu-niyāma* to the emergence of self-awareness and therefore of the *kamma-niyāma*;

Second, a phase of voluntary growth in self or moral consciousness under the *kamma-niyāma*, which constitutes the Higher Evolution of the individual in its lower phase, including all the stages from the emergence of reflexive consciousness to the first arising of *prajñā* at Stream Entry;

Third, a phase of the development of transcendental consciousness, unfolding spontaneously independent of individual volition once the stream has been entered under *dhamma-niyāma* processes – the Higher Evolution in its higher phase;

Fourth, a phase in which Enlightened consciousness flowers more and more richly. Here the *dhamma-niyāma* processes unfold completely beyond the other *niyāmas*. While a Buddha is alive and has a body, the three lower *niyāmas* still operate - however the *kamma-niyāma* has no relevance here, since there is not even a trace of self-attachment. Once Parinirvāṇa is attained at death, there is only *dhamma-niyāma* and we have no categories by which to describe what 'happens' – and this was one of Vacchagotta's questions that the Buddha said could not be answered by any of the categories of our thought. Here we enter a mystery.

Cosmic Going for Refuge

This progressive sweep clearly has a different character in each phase, as each is dominated by a different order of conditionality. However, there is a common element all the way through: there is an upward momentum, lifting on to the next level. We have most direct understanding of that momentum as we experience it within ourselves – in the second phase, that of voluntary growth. We feel a definite inner urge to go beyond ourselves as we now are to something more: there is a combination of disillusionment (*saṃskāra-duḥkha*) with our present experience, a sense of being drawn towards something further (*śraddhā*), and a commitment to move towards the highest goal we can see. This all finds expression in the Buddhist context in the act of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels.

In the third phase, that of transcendental development beyond Stream-entry, that momentum no longer depends upon our conscious effort: it is experienced as a current carrying one along or a will beyond one's own, guiding one's actions – in its altruistic form, the 'Will to Enlightenment', the *bodhicitta*.

The motivating force operating in the fourth phase defies description, but leads to conduct that is unfailingly beneficial. Presumably, the Jina Amoghasiddhi embodies the 'motivation' of the Enlightened mind: he embodies the transcendental counterpart of the *skandha* of *saṃskāra* or volition, he is the head of the Karma family, his Wisdom is the Action Accomplishing, and his name means 'unobstructed success'. Sangharakshita says in his seminar on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, '...the action of Amoghasiddhi represents something subtle and even esoteric. It's not just action in the ordinary, crude, obvious sense. ... it works in "unknown ways".' This is perhaps the nearest we can get to the momentum here: an unending creative force that moves mysteriously to accomplish the benefit of all.

But what of the first phase? What is the momentum that carries the evolving organism on to the next level? Something analogous to volition is observable in living organisms: a drive or urge of an instinctive kind, whether for survival or reproduction, is the precursor of what

emerges in us as our own will. Extended far enough in favourable enough conditions, that instinctive urge or drive transcends itself, even one might say fulfils itself, in self-consciousness volition.

At lower levels still, biological, chemical, and physical processes cannot be characterised even as drives or urges in anything but the most poetic sense, but they still have a momentum that, given the appropriate circumstances, leads to the arising of an organism with sense-intelligence. It is interesting to note that the translation of the *Atthasālinī*, one of the texts that refer to the *niyāmas*, has 'caloric order' for *utu-niyāma* and this seems to be the usual understanding of it. In *Abhidharma* theory, heat is the *dhātu* or element that brings about change and transformation. This points to the inherent momentum even in physical and primitive organic matter. We thus have a dynamic principle that is represented by 'heat' at the most basic levels, by instinctive desire at the animal level, by will at the level of the human being, and by *bodhicitta* at the level of the Stream-entrant.

Looking at things in this way brings to mind Schopenhauer's notion of *Wille*, which Sangharakshita acknowledges may have influenced his own thinking. Could the *dhamma-niyāma* itself be the progressive momentum, driving the whole evolutionary process, finding its unstoppable expression at Stream Entry and finally unfettered at Buddhahood? There are ways of reading the source commentaries that could support this. However, engaging in this, so tantalising, area we stray dangerously close to a theory of evolution – in other words, to a view. *Pratītya-samutpāda* relieves us from that danger by enabling us simply to state what we may observe: in dependence on this level, that arises.¹⁷

Sangharakshita sees the progression as a continuous momentum, manifesting on higher and higher levels, finding its full expression once the *dhamma-niyāma* comes into play. He thus dares to speak poetically of a 'Cosmic Going for Refuge', a phrase very much open to misinterpretation, being sometimes taken, whether in mistaken excitement or equally mistaken dismay, to imply somehow a conscious intention on the part of the Cosmos. In his understanding, it refers simply to a momentum that can be seen at every level of evolution, from the merest atom to the full flowering of Bodhi. At every level the possibility exists of moving to a higher – there is the possibility of 'self-transcendence', to use terminology found elsewhere in Sangharakshita's work. It is this always possible upward momentum that is the Cosmic Going for Refuge, no more and no less.

If this terminology, and the allied language of Evolution, Lower and Higher, has any value at all, it is that it brings out the continuity of this progressive trend, and therefore the continuity of our own efforts upon the Path with processes that occur naturally all around us, as well as with the forces that move within the Buddha's own mind. What one feels as an urge within oneself is not merely accidental. It is a trend, even a momentum, within things that now emerges in one's own consciousness. The universe cooperates with you in your efforts to follow the Path – or, rather, your own conscious efforts cooperate with the evolutionary trend in the universe.

Understanding this brings an attitude essential to following the Path: a humble and confident openness to processes that are far larger than one's own small selfhood. This disposition is indispensable - even if one does not take to the terminology of evolution or finds the phrase 'Cosmic Going for Refuge' too problematic.

Faith in the progressive trend

Whether in these terms or not, the recognition of the progressive trend within *pratītya-samutpāda* is essential to leading the Dharma life. We need to be confident that it is possible to go beyond our present level of consciousness and to realise fully that it can only be done by creating the conditions out of which new levels emerge. Without that confidence and understanding, we will not apply ourselves to assembling the necessary conditions.

First, we need to be convinced that there is a *kamma-niyāma*, a karmic order of conditionality. Only when we have that faith will we make an effort to create the conditions for our further growth. We will practise *śīla*, acting in ways that are helpful to ourselves and others, in accordance with the Precepts; we will develop wholesome states of mind, through *samādhi*; and we will gain as clear an understanding of the Dhamma as we can, through cultivating *śruta-*, *cintā-*, and *bhāvanā-mayā-prajñā*. These efforts will bring higher and richer states of consciousness into being and will bring us into increasing harmony with the way things are.

Then, we need to have faith that there is a *dhamma-niyāma*, a dharmic order of conditionality. Only then will we be confident that we can let go of our selfhood and give up our individual volition. We will systematically disabuse ourselves of the illusion of a fixed self and will deliberately let go of our clinging onto it, through the practice of *prajñā* or *vipaśyanā* meditation. This will create the conditions in dependence on which the spontaneous stream may emerge within us, carrying us on to Buddhahood.

This is the fundamental faith we need in order to lead a Dharma life: a belief in the karmic and dharmic orders of conditionality. There is no need for us to believe in metaphysical realities or agencies outside experience – there is no need for eternalism. But that lack of any eternal being or force need not imply a nihilistic sense that there is no meaning or order or direction to life. The faith we need for Dharma life arises out of what we can establish through clear logical analysis and validate at every moment in our experience: everything arises in dependence on conditions. Within that conditioned arising is a progressive possibility: this again we can verify in our observation of nature, as regards the lower *niyāmas*. As regards the *kamma-niyāma*, we can recognise its force in our own lives: we can feel within us the power of our own urge to develop and can witness how skilful action brings a progressive change in our own consciousness. If we do not have our own direct experience of the *dhamma-niyāma*, we can refer to our knowledge of the Buddha and his enlightened disciples down the ages, for the Buddha exemplifies, even embodies, the dharmic order of conditionality. Reading about the Buddha and other great heroes of the Dharma, studying their words, insofar as we can, strengthens our conviction that there is a *dhamma-niyāma* that we can align ourselves with, so that we may attain freedom from suffering.

The niyāmas and the system of meditation

If we have that faith in the progressive trend within reality, especially in the form of the *kamma-* and *dhamma-niyāmas*, then we will be able to practise the Dharma wholeheartedly. We will align ourselves with the progressive trend by assembling the conditions that will move us on from level to level. This is what we may methodically do by following

Sangharakshita's System of Meditation, with its four progressive stages and fifth 'stageless' stage, which is the framework for the Triratna Community's approach to meditation. The System works with all five *niyāmas*, bringing us into a relationship with each of them that will allow the progressive or spiral kind of conditionality to unfold through us. Although it is termed the System of *Meditation*, it is really much more than that and encompasses the stages we must go through in all aspects of our lives.

The Stage of Integration grounds us in our awareness of *utu-*, *bīja-*, and *mano-niyāmas* as we directly encounter them. It begins with basic mindfulness of the body, through *kāyānupaśyanā* and *vedanānupaśyanā*. Without that mindfulness of bodily sensations and feelings, consciousness will be distorted and unreal, to some extent, and therefore unable to evolve in a balanced way. Integration here includes such issues as taking proper care of one's body, as the vehicle of one's further evolution. If one does not look after the health of one's body, a bundle of conditioned arisings under the first three orders of conditionality, it will cause many hindrances to one's practice of the Dharma.

Integrating *mano-niyāma* energies is even more demanding than mindfulness of the body. The instincts and conditionings that form our basic mental make-up are more elusive and can be very complex. Yet, if one does not know, to some extent, one's own particular nature, the *mano-niyāma* conditions as they manifest in oneself, one's efforts will constantly be undermined. We need to be aware of the instinctual demands of our animal nature, if it is not to dominate us, in one way or another. We need to recognise the influence upon of us of our own family and cultural conditioning in shaping our responses under *mano-niyāma*. Again, we need to have some understanding of our particular character type, our own mental 'physique', which we have quite independent of our own choices. Coming to terms with one's own nature and conditioning in this sense is a major part of early spiritual life. All of this is value neutral – no blame attaches to us for our basic physique, our particular character shape, or our background and childhood experience. However, to be karmically responsible, we need broadly to understand ourselves from these points of view, so that we can act in ways that are skilful, taking into account who we actually are. All this is the task of the Stage of Integration.

The Stage of Positive Emotion works especially with the *kamma-niyāma*. This means trying to be ethical, so that one's actions, guided by the Precepts, are more and more helpful to oneself and to others. It also means addressing underlying motivations by deliberately cultivating helpful intentions – skilful mental states – through the practice of meditation. Included also is genuine communication and friendship, especially in the context of Sangha. These efforts of *śīla* and *samādhi* will gradually bear fruit under the law of Karma. One will experience deeper and richer states of consciousness emerging – not merely at the time of meditation. One will have a more abiding sense of satisfaction and self-confidence, one will feel a deeper harmony with others and a stronger sympathy, one will have a more subtle aesthetic sensibility, one will dwell more frequently in dhyana. If that is not our experience it is because we have not set up the conditions for it, through integration and positive emotion – we have not yet worked sufficiently with the lower *niyāmas* and with the *kamma-niyāma*.

The *kamma-niyāma* comes into play when self-consciousness arises. Working with the progressive possibilities in the *kamma-niyāma* requires us to have a sense of ourselves as responsible ethical agents. We must be capable of standing apart from the flow of our

experience and identifying a self that owns the experience and that is capable of choosing to act skilfully rather than unskilfully. This self-reflexiveness is initially quite crude, involving a rather rigid sense of ourselves as something real and separate. One of the consequences of development under the *kamma-niyāma*, as we practise the Stage of Positive Emotion, is that the sense of self becomes more flexible and interpenetrates more sympathetically with the world around us. However, that self-sense still rests upon a deep quasi-instinctual illusion that must be transcended. Although the idea of self is essential if one is to work with the progressive trend in the *kamma-niyāma*, it is simply an idea, limited and ultimately limiting. We must give it up, so that a new order of conditionality may take over.

The *dhamma-niyāma* functions beyond our willing, so we must renounce the illusion of an independent self if it is to manifest within us. This is the function of the Stage of Spiritual Death. Through practices like the Contemplation of the Six Elements, we deliberately see through and give up our self-identity.¹⁸ If we have created a sufficiently refined and sensitive consciousness through developing conditions under the *kamma-niyāma*, then this renunciation of fixed self-identity creates the space within which the *dhamma-niyāma* may function spontaneously through us.

The Stage of Spiritual Rebirth trains us to 'revere and rely upon' the *dhamma-niyāma* completely, resting in it as what unfolds within us when we give up our self-attachment. It means allowing a new supra-personal motive force to operate through us, now that we have relinquished self-referent willing. The most effective way of practising here is to enter the world of archetypal imagination, especially through the visualisation of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. We feed our illumined imaginations with archetypal figures that embody the *dhamma-niyāma* and thereby train in submitting ourselves more and more willingly to the movement inherent within reality that leads on to Buddhahood and beyond.

The Stage of No Practice, in which we 'just sit', is undertaken in parallel with each stage of the System of Meditation. At each stage it has a somewhat different significance, but one could speak of it as allowing the evolutionary trend to unfold naturally within one, without any effort to bring anything into being. The effort here is to stay awake to the processes of one's own mind, with a deep confidence in the progressive trend in reality as one senses it within oneself, however dimly.

The Buddha as the focus of faith

The Dhamma life, exemplified here by the System of Meditation, depends on faith in the progressive trend in conditionality, especially as manifested in the *kamma-* and *dhamma-niyāmas*. One must have confidence in the mechanism, so to speak, that makes progress possible if one is to exert oneself on the Path and overcome its many obstacles and difficulties. But that is not enough. Even that faith is not sustainable unless there is some focus for one's devotion, some higher object for one's aspiration, to which one can look up and that one can revere.¹⁹ If there is no such higher devotional object progress must appear as a progress in self – which is really no progress at all. Progress is, in the end, progress in self-transcendence. For real progress to be possible, whether at the level of *kamma-niyāma* or of *dhamma-niyāma*, there must be a giving up of self to something beyond self that one serves and depends upon.²⁰

Sangharakshita sees the historical Buddha as the central focus of devotion and believes that we should keep him very much at the centre, not allowing other figures to usurp his place, if we are to preserve the integrity of the Dharma. All other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have their meaning through him: they are imaginal explorations of the Buddha's inner nature, personifications of his Enlightened qualities. All the figures on the Triratna Community's Refuge Tree, devised by Sangharakshita, achieve their significance through Sakyamuni.²¹

This is not merely a question of respect for our great human guide and teacher. If we are truly to give ourselves to something it must be more than human. The Buddha attained and came to embody something that went altogether beyond our human understanding. For this reason, Sangharakshita provocatively suggests that we should see the Buddha as the Buddhist God – the 'God who did not create the universe'!²² This ironic proposal challenges the humanistic interpretation of the Buddha, inviting us to recognise that he has 'gone altogether beyond' and dwells in a sphere to which we have as yet no direct access. Devotion here implies something of awe – of the sacred or numinous.

Devotion begins where rational understanding falters. Faith in the Buddha Sakyamuni, as our ideal and the fulfilment of the progressive trend in conditionality, takes over where rational explanations run out. Right View in the form of *pratītya-samutpāda*, understood in terms of the two trends and the five *niyāmas*, gives us the understanding we need to follow the Path. But it offers little by way of explanation: why does one thing arise in dependence on another? What is the driver of evolution? Especially it gives us no grasp on what lies beyond the merely human. What is the nature of a Buddha's experience, especially after his Parinirvāṇa? Sangharakshita has been intrigued and inspired by the *Gārava-sutta*, in which we find that even the Buddha feels the need to revere and rely upon something, and sees that it is only the Dharma that he can worship. Clearly here Dharma is not just his own teaching, but it must be something more than a principle, for one can scarcely revere a principle. What is it that the Buddha relies upon?²³

We must accept the limits of rational understanding and beware of terminology that appears to explain what is inexplicable, inevitably falling into the reified absolutes of eternalism. We must also not get trapped into a nihilistic dismissal of all meaning and value because we've reached the limits of reason. Buddhism invites us to accept that the Dharma transcends our rational understanding.²⁴ It has no 'mania for explanation', Sangharakshita says. Certainty is bad for you, spiritually speaking, whether about one's own experience or about the nature of things: there is wisdom in insecurity.²⁵ The Bodhisattva stands on a position that is devoid of a support, as the *Ratnaguṇasamcayagāthā* has it. One must accept that there is a mystery beyond what reason is capable of telling us. 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.'²⁶

The fact that reason has limits does not mean that one cannot approach or enter that mystery, but one must do so with another faculty than that of reason. That faculty is the spiritual imagination that transcends reason, using the language of ritual and devotion, of poetry and art, of symbol and archetype, especially in the form of the visionary Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the *sambhogakāya*.²⁷ The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas take us into the depths of who the Buddha is, giving us some imaginative glimpse of and relationship with his Enlightenment.

Sangharakshita suggests that the need to give some content to what it was that the Buddha 'revered and relied upon' was fulfilled in the *Sukhāvati-vyūha-sutras* by the image of the Buddha Amitabha, the Buddha, so to speak, beyond the Buddha. What even the Buddha reveres cannot be merely a body of teachings, nor yet simply a principle, yet it cannot be some kind of eternal Creator-god. However, we misunderstand it if we think of it as impersonal – as Sangharakshita says, if we see it as impersonal it will 'feel' sub-personal to us, since our ordinary experience only deals in the categories of personal and sub-personal (if you like, the *kamma-niyāma*, on the one hand, and the *utu-*, *bīja-*, and *mano-niyāmas* on the other). Sangharakshita says in *The Three Jewels*, 'The *dharmakāya* is not impersonal in the sense that it utterly and completely excludes personality, for that would be to identify it with one of two opposite terms, whereas the truth of the matter is that, being non-different from Absolute Reality[!], the *dharmakāya* transcends all opposites whatsoever.'²⁸ Insofar as it is almost impossible for us to consider anything that is not included in one or other of these two opposites, it is more accurate to think of – or, better, imagine – the object of the Buddha's reverence as supra-personal, rather than either personal or impersonal. That is what the figure of the Buddha Amitabha represents: the eternal Buddha to whom even the historical Buddha looks up. His image is food for the illumined imagination, which must take over and continue where reason has flown as high as it may.

But symbols and archetypes are multivalent. Even these visionary figures are capable of misleading, unless they are linked to a clear expression and understanding of Right View – after all a suicide bomber may be inspired by an archetype.²⁹ Sangharakshita considers that all Buddhist archetypes need to be anchored in the image of the historical Buddha, who is the enunciator of *pratītya-samutpāda*. The full meaning of the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas can only clearly be recognised if they are seen through the Buddha Sakyamuni, whose inner reality they represent and from whose historical personality they have emerged.

For Sangharakshita the figure of the historical Buddha is the key. Instead of resorting to abstractions, we should focus on his life and teaching, to give us the confidence and courage we need to practise the Dharma, without danger of falling into views.³⁰ We can plunge more deeply into the mystery of his Enlightened nature by contemplating and worshipping the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, which embody his inner character, thereby engaging our uplifted imaginations, beyond mere reason and emotion. The Buddha Sakyamuni exemplifies the Path, as well as embodying the process inherent in reality that makes Buddhahood possible. When we contemplate the Buddha, we hold before us the fact that the progressive potential of conditionality is always present and actualises whenever we choose to set up the conditions in dependence upon which it unfolds. Right View consists in seeing this clearly, without the eternalism of reified abstractions or the nihilism of a meaningless and valueless universe. This is the fundamental 'philosophical' position of the Triratna Community, insofar as it follows Sangharakshita's particular presentation of the Dharma.

- 1 **Endnotes are of two kinds: details of references in the text and additional comments on points raised. These latter are not essential to following and understanding the argument, but are often points Sangharakshita made in our discussions that did not fit the main flow of the piece, but seemed too valuable to lose altogether. Some are simply my own reflections. I suggest that they are only referred to on a second reading. All translations from the Pali are by Bhikkhu Bodhi.**

In this connection, Sangharakshita quotes a very interesting saying of William Blake's, 'Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth'.

He says of himself, 'If I read Schopenhauer, I become a Schopenhauerian; if I read Plotinus, I become a Neoplatonist.' He says that he empathises first and later engages his critical faculties. This is also true of Buddhist teachings.

- 2 There is another factor to be born in mind looking at his exposition of such teachings. Sangharakshita was giving his account on the basis of the scholarship available in English at the time. Buddology has developed very greatly in the last 50 years and quite a lot is now known about, for instance, the origins of the Mahayana, the teachings and development of the Yogacara school, or even the evolution of the Pali Canon that was not recognised when he was giving some of his lectures and seminars on such topics. We must then take into account the most recent and well-established findings of modern scholarship on philology and textual history, as well as Sangharakshita's purpose and attitude in speaking about Buddhist traditions.
- 3 See *Brahmajāla-sutta*, DN1.3.32: The Buddha speaks of each of the views as being 'merely the feeling (*vedanā*) of those who do not know and see...' and then traces the *nidānas* back from *vedanā*.
- 4 See especially the *Kaccānagotta-sutta*, SN12.15.
- 5 DN1
- 6 The Buddha speaks of straightening out views (*diṭṭhi ca ujukā*), together with completely purifying morality, as 'purifying the starting point of wholesome states', which is the basis for the practice of the *satipaṭṭhānas*. SN47.3.
- 7 e.g. KN.Sn.IV.8&9.
- 8 MN72: *Aggi-vaccagotta-sutta*.
Later tradition, especially that initiated by Nagarjuna, demonstrated that it was not simply that he would not answer because it was not useful to do so, but that any possible answers would lead to self-contradiction: it was the questions themselves that were the problem, because of the assumptions on which they rested.
- 9 MN26.12.
- 10 At the time, Sangharakshita had, of course, his own justification for his usages, although he would not employ many of them now. He has, for instance, often been called to account for his use of 'The Unconditioned', especially in relation to Nirvana, whilst also asserting that Nirvana arises as the expositional endpoint of a conditioned process. He acquits himself brilliantly by distinguishing between spatial and temporal metaphors and between doctrinal and methodological viewpoints. Nirvana, viewed from the perspective of one who has attained it, is unconditioned (or more accurately 'unconfected', a more etymologically correct translation of *asamskrta*) in a spatial sense, insofar as it is 'impartible', not made up of anything. However, from the point of view of one setting out to attain it, it is conditioned, insofar as the experience of Nirvana arises at the end of a temporal sequence of conditionally arising states. Significant as this may be, it is perhaps not necessary to engage with the term in this way at all. In the Suttas, the Buddha in all cases but one, and that probably a late addition to the canon, uses 'unconditioned' to mean unconditioned by something in particular – usually greed, hatred, and delusion. That usage seems to have been turned by later followers into an abstraction. Sangharakshita inherited that abstraction and made good sense of it.

(For *asaṃskṛta* [*asaṃkhata*] in the Suttas, see SN43: *Asaṃkhatasamyutta*. For the exception see AN152. With thanks to Sagaramati, who has rightly been emphasising this point for many years!)

A similar movement from non-metaphysical usage in the Sutta-Piṭaka to a metaphysical one in the Abhidhamma and the commentaries can be seen in the understanding and interpretation of the term *Nibbāna*. It begins as a metaphor, 'becoming cool', for a 'psychological' experience, and gradually acquires metaphysical significance.

- 11 It is not a view in the sense that it is a description of the fundamental characteristic that can be recognised in all things, rather than an all-inclusive reality, so to speak, containing all things.
- 12 In the *Atthasālinī*, Buddhaghosa's commentary on the *Dhammasaṅgani* of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (see the English translation, *The Expositor*, p360), and in his commentary on DN14.1.17, *Mahāpadāna-sutta*.
- 13 Sangharakshita first learned of the five *niyāma* from the writings of the British scholar, Mrs Caroline Rhys Davids, for whose sharp eye for significant detail we in the Triratna Community owe a considerable debt of gratitude. See *Buddhism*, Mrs Rhys Davids. Interestingly, Dr Ambedkar also shows knowledge of this little-known schema, perhaps also getting it from Mrs Rhys Davids. He uses it especially to show that caste has nothing to do with karma. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, BkIII, part 3, Section 6: *To believe that Karma is the instrument of Moral Order is Dhamma*.
- 14 There is glimpse here of the very complex interrelationship between the *niyāmas*, for the *kamma-niyāma* brings its effects partly through the lower *niyāmas*. There is much more to be said about this, and about the passing of karmic effects from one life to another through the other *niyamas*, as well as about the *dhamma-niyāma* in relation to the rest.
- 15 See *The Niyāma Dipani* (The Manual of Cosmic Order) by Mahathera Ledi Sayadaw, available at <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/buddhism/ledinyma.htm> #5foldniyama.
- 16 This is a point the Buddha makes again and again. For instance, he urges his disciples not to 'reflect upon the world', i.e. its origins and functioning, because it is 'not beneficial, irrelevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and does not lead to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna'. What he encourages us to think about is the Four Noble Truths: how to end suffering. SN56.41.
- 17 See also Sagaramati's significant paper, *Two Cheers for Taṇhā*.
- 18 Sangharakshita stresses that it is important not merely to see through, but actively to renounce, otherwise insight does not penetrate deep into experience. The affective and cognitive aspects of delusion are closely intertwined, but it is easy to fool ourselves that we have seen through, when we have merely made an intellectual adjustment of a self-flattering kind.
- 19 It is this point that I believe Dr Ambedkar is making when he insists that Morality (which he equates with Dhamma) must be 'sacred'. He argues that, without that sacred awe, most people would revert to self-interest and therefore to the non-morality of the most powerful. No doubt in the Indian context 'sacred' (*pavitra* in Hindi) requires no explanation, but it is the sense of something beyond human understanding that is of sublime, awe-inspiring, and overwhelming power and splendour that commands our reverence and devotion. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Bk IV, part 1, sect. 6: *Mere Morality is not Enough. It must be Sacred and Universal*.
- 20 This is necessary at any time, but is all the more necessary because of the prevailing nihilistic materialism of much of modern culture and the widespread ethos of self-fulfilment – the fulfilment of a self bounded within one life alone.
- 21 Sangharakshita has, of course, recently been tidying up his way of understanding the Triratna Community's Refuge Tree – another example of the unfolding of his own teaching. He now sees the Refuge Tree as essentially about Going for Refuge to the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni. The Teachers of the Past are not on the Tree as Refuges, but as 'great Buddhist spiritual heroes', followers of the Buddha, whom we may respect very highly even though we should not accept their teachings uncritically. The Teachers of the Present represent Triratna Community's

immediate spiritual background, and again are not objects of Refuge. Both Teachers of the Past and Present are of course worthy of respect – Sangharakshita now calls the Tree the Tree of Refuge and Respect.

All the other figures, together with those members of the Triratna Order meditate upon in sadhana practice, are Archetypes of Enlightenment. When we Go for Refuge to them as Archetypes of Enlightenment, we are in reality Going for Refuge to Sakyamuni, because it is through him that we know of the Enlightenment of which they are personifications.

Milarepa and Padmasambhava are, incidentally, rather problematic since they appear on the Tree as 'spiritual heroes', but in their respective sadhanas as Archetypes of Enlightenment – essentially because their historical and archetypal characters are distinguishable.

Sangharakshita is here making some very important points that may appear a little surprising.

They merit much fuller treatment. The main issue is the need to recognise and maintain Sakyamuni's central place in the Buddhist life, as the intersection of the historical with the supra-historical. Maintaining his central place is vital to the future unity of the Triratna Order – and indeed to the future of Buddhism worldwide – but also to preserving the balance of clear understanding and imaginative inspiration, which can only be united in his figure.

22 It seems that when Christian missionaries first arrived in Thailand they found there was no word for God in Thai – so they coined the phrase 'The Buddha Who Created the Universe'.

Sangharakshita rather mischievously proposes calling the Buddha, 'The God Who Did Not Create the Universe!' This is not entirely far fetched. The notion of God has three principal aspects: creator, keeper of the moral order, and ideal. For Buddhists the question of creation does not arise. Buddhists do not require any cosmic agency to reward and punish since the moral order is natural, structured into reality in the form of *kamma-niyāma* conditionality. However the Buddha is our ideal and embodies the goal of our spiritual life. It is because of him that we have encountered the Dharma at all in this life. He therefore, in that respect, fills for us the place of God in the theistic religions and we should not deprive ourselves of the opportunity to feel devotion because we are squeamish about God – even if we do not, no doubt for very good reasons, adopt Sangharakshita's ironically suggested terminology!

23 In the *Gārava-sutta*, the Buddha, immediately after his Bodhi, recognises that not to 'revere and rely upon' anything is a source of suffering. He realises that there is no one alive to whom he can look up or depend upon, so he decides to dwell revering and relying upon the Dharma. SNI.6.2. Sangharakshita wondered what went through Bhikkhu Bodhi's mind as he translated this remarkable sutta, which seems not to have excited much comment in Theravada tradition. It opens up quite a mystery that even the Buddha must 'reverence and rely upon' something.

24 'It is enough to cause you bewilderment, Vaccha, enough to cause you confusion. For this Dhamma, Vaccha, is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise.' *Aggi-vacchagotta-sutta*, MN72.18.

25 This should apply to our thinking and talking about our own spiritual life also. We should not prematurely try to force whatever arises in meditation, for instance, into the straitjacket of Buddhist terminology, applying traditional labels as a way of saying what happened. Nor should we try to calibrate our experience, fitting it into one or other hierarchical schema. We should simply forget traditional categories, Sangharakshita says, and, if it is genuinely helpful to speak of what happened at all, we should simply describe as best we can the 'raw' experience. In many cases, 'claims' are innocently made through inadequacy of expression and understanding, seizing upon the nearest label that seems appropriate.

26 *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā*, II.3; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, proposition 7: the closing words of the work.

27 In our discussions, Sangharakshita remarked on the way in which *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*, a Chinese work attributed apocryphally to Asvaghōṣa, first attempts some very complex metaphysics to explain conundrums posed by its own presuppositions and then takes

refuge in a poetic image to make its point: the mutual perfuming of *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa*. The image communicates something of real spiritual significance, which Sangharakshita has found very appealing, whilst the philosophical arguments seem irrelevant, and even dangerous. Similarly Sangharakshita considers that Plato is at his best when he communicates through myth, such as the myth of the cave in *The Republic* and Diotima's teaching about the divinity of Love in *The Symposium*.

Incidentally, Sangharakshita commented that *The Awakening of Faith* finally resorts to an exposition of the ten precepts, the law of karma, and *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* - because in the end that is what it all comes down to: you have to practise the Dharma.

28 (Part 1, sect. 5)

29 A quick search of websites referring to figures from the Buddhist archetypal pantheon will turn up many references that have nothing to do with the Dharma. One will find Buddhist figures put to all sorts of New Age, esoteric, or psychological uses – often with great authority and conviction.

30 Sangharakshita suggests that members of the Triratna Community should make far more use in teaching and practice of the *Jātakas*, especially the canonical ones, since these present the long struggles over many lifetimes that preceded the Buddha's Enlightenment. This gives us perspective on our own spiritual efforts, both in terms of the magnitude of what is to be done and of the wonder of it. The stories illustrate his 'taking the lead' in lifetime after lifetime, whether as a great king serving his people or as a sage who brings the decisive wisdom that saves the situation. This offers an inspiring example of what is to be done.