

Going Beyond – an exploration of sunyata and how to get there!

(Preamble - setting up visual aids:

Firstly: Aloka's image of Bhante as Mythopanic Psychopomp helping us to the beyond.

Secondly: Nagasiddhi's sculpture of a house with mirrors for walls and a sign on the door - which I am taking as an image of Bodhicitta. Don't worry if you can't see what the sign on the door says – I will tell you at the end of the talk...

Going forth and going beyond are very linked. This weekend we are celebrating the 75th anniversary of Bhante's going forth. One of the striking things when we hear accounts of his going forth is the delight and confidence, and, as Padmavajra said, the inspiration with which he sets out. Although of course setting off like this has its challenges, he is far, far, from downhearted - he is setting out because he is drawn to something, he can taste the freedom, a freedom so profound and all-encompassing that it is worth dedicating his (and ultimately all of our!) whole lives to.

So, in the first part of the talk today, we are going to explore this taste. Bhante talks about it in terms of *texture* and *mystery*. We are in the territory of liberation. What happens when we let go, go forth, when we leave the prison walls behind? But we are also in the territory of metaphor. It will by necessity be a poetic evocation, 'broken hints' as Bhante calls them. This 'reality' is utterly un-wordable, ungraspable and with no possibility of containment or delineation of any sort - but if we don't take it all too literally and let the metaphors do their work, we may find some of the texture and mystery of sunyata rubbing off!

And, having said that, I hope it will also be of some practical use, as in the second part of the talk we will look at some of the many ways Bhante has given us to engage with Going Beyond.

So effectively we are looking at - **What does it mean to go beyond and... How do we do it?**

We will use the metaphor of **sunyata**.

Often translated as 'emptiness' (although I always remember Ratnasuri, a venerable Dharmacharini in her 80s at the time, coming out of a meditation and saying: *Emptiness? Rubbish! It should be fullness!* Which very succinctly points to the qualities of vividness aliveness and distinctiveness that seem to go hand in hand with the ungraspability and lack of solidity...

Bhante reminds us that Sunyata was originally the Buddha's communication of his transcendental Awakened experience. And it points to the way in which we may ourselves experience that truth.

He says *'Its sole purpose is to take us to take us across the waters of birth and death'*. i.e. to the deathless. And that it has *'No Significance apart from that'*.

So, it has no significance apart from the deepest alleviation of suffering!

He says it is: *'Quintessentially a matter of experience. All the perfection of wisdom texts deal with Sunyata as a direct spiritual experience.'*

And he talks in terms of the Four Sunyatas – four different stages of unfolding mystery of the nature of experience.

Let's start with **Sanskrita sunyata** – emptiness of the conditioned, the compounded, or fabricated, or you could say, the tendency to turn experience into an object which we then grasp at i.e. Samsara.

So, what is samsara empty of? It is empty of the possibility of satisfaction on its own terms, it is empty of permanence, stability and persistence through time. Because when we look we cannot actually find any solid, stable entities, any 'things' that would be capable of persisting through time.

Being 'good Buddhists' we are familiar with some version of this. The Lakshanas right? Because we know this we go forth, we go for refuge - but certainly for me even though it feels like on some level I know this through and through – I keep acting as if it were not the case... as if permanence and satisfaction could be found in tinkering with or manipulating what I think of Samsara *out there*.

I am patient up to a point, but I reach my limit. I don't want more COVID restrictions now. With a sore heart I come to accept parental deaths, but not those of younger friends, or people who have looked after themselves well. I don't want people dying in hospital without their loved ones able to be present. And, at a deeper level I am constantly fabricating, reconstructing my reality, affirming my existence, protecting my belongings, rehearsing my opinions and my centrality. This is an automatic, rarely conscious, very powerful response.

A lot of practice involves working with the klesas - the stranglehold of fabrications that hold this core sense of self so firmly, but evasively, in place - robbing us of our clarity, sapping our energy and blocking our sensitivity and responsiveness. It involves bringing more and more of us into play, working holistically to address the whole person and growing our confidence in our unlimited, dynamic, ungraspable nature.

Secondly, **Asamskrita Sunyata**. Asamskrita - the uncompounded, unfabricated, and in that sense, as Bhante says, 'not artificial', sometimes called Nirvana.

This is the affirmation that, when we are not fabricating, constructing our world and being, we are not creating suffering. When we are not creating separations and divisions, especially the fundamental division between 'I' and 'other', we live a very different experience, live in a very different world. We can get a taste of this possibility through our yidam or connection with the Buddha and sometimes through open hearted and agenda free communication (the breath of the dakini), through our response to the beauty of the dharma, literature, the living natural world, arts and poetry. We can feel its texture, be called by its mystery.

So, when we use terms like Samsara and Nirvana, it can seem like the stakes are high, as if we are writing things in capitals, if it's not one then it's the other - if it's not Nirvana - it must

be Samsara. And it's true that if one is empty of the other, they are mutually exclusive. But the nature of existence we are talking about here has no solidity, no fixed entity. We are talking about **process**, about the dynamic nature of mind, of the world of experience.

There *are* no separate entities of Samsara or Nirvana in different places with different contents, just two radically different modes of perception. When we perceive dualistically, partially, with even very subtle biases, Samsara is present. And when 'perception' is non-dual, not separate, freed from self-reference at the deepest level, a totally different relationship and interpretation arises - which we can call Nirvana.

If we want to stay true to this dynamic, ungraspable nature of existence, we need to recognise that the Samsara we experience as external 'out there' arises out of a particular way of perceiving. Of course, as I have said, it is a very powerful, deeply engrained, evasive, deeply rehearsed way of perceiving, but I have found it really helpful to take on board that there ***actually can be nothing fixed or solid about it***. And the fundamental component of that samsaric tendency is **clinging** or tension. The split or separation or dualistic differentiation which creates the tension is not something inherent to the situation, it is something we are adding or creating. So experientially (and let's not forget that this teaching is an exploration of experience) we can start to notice, to feel into, where we are holding on, creating the split, solidifying, fabricating, constructing or confecting our world or sense of self. And with awareness and an open heart we can do what Bhante has called unhooking from the trimandala - the grasper, the grasped and the act of grasping. We unhook from the object of clinging or tension, we unhook from the subject- the one who is fabricating, we can even unhook from the label for a particular emotion or experience that we are engaged with.

So maybe this can give us a taste, a glimpse of the third level of sunyata. This is **Mahasunyata**, 'great emptiness', where all opposites are confounded. We need to recognise the deeply provisional nature of all conceptual distinctions. Even the distinction between Samsara and Nirvana becomes redundant. They don't have ontological, independent reality of their own. They are a product of dualistic thinking.

In experience, as we become more and more at home in the dynamic unfolding mystery of each moment, we can increasingly feel a subtle tension. We feel the restriction, the limitation, produced by holding on to ideas such as coming and going, or even ideas of any one to go, or anywhere at all to get to. All such assumptions, no matter how subtle, obscure the mystery and open-endedness of the living experience 'underneath'.

And, with the fourth stage of sunyata, the texture of reality gets even subtler still, even the subtlest level of jneyavarana, the veil of obscuring views responsible for our tendency to separate, even this, the subtlest conceptualising, is at an end. There is just sheer naked self-illuminating awareness of how things are - as Bhante calls it, following Vimalakirti - the thunderous silence: **Sunyata sunyata** – the emptiness of sunyata itself.

Bhante has explained the gate gate mantra in terms of the Four sunyatas:

Gate – gone forth from the conditioned

Gate – gone beyond to the unconditioned

Paragate – gone beyond any distinction between the two.

Parasamgate – gone altogether beyond any construction, fabrication or subtle formulation that separates us from the naked experience of how things are.

Bodhi Svaha

I hope I have said enough to give you a flavour, a taste, a feel for, the texture of going beyond and enough to know that we are talking in metaphors and need to hold the concept of 'going beyond' itself very lightly indeed!

Let's now take a look at some of the ways that we have of engaging with this territory.

I sometimes imagine Bhante returning from India. I think he has described feeling full of blessings, full of the many gems of teaching and practice he had been showered with but wondering how he could even start to share them in a way that would have a lasting effect.

His answer was to create an Order, an Order that was based on a **radical vision** of how we can go beyond. The whole System of Practice that he created is designed to help us do this. It is designed to give us the opportunity to go beyond suffering in a deep and sustained way - including every aspect of our being - over the entire course of our life and lives. So I want to look at the different areas of the system of practice and highlight some of the many ways in which they can bring about this **radical going beyond for ourselves and others**.

Let's start with **Integration**:

In the early days of the Order, looking around at all the enthusiasm and energy for the Dharma that was gathering around him, Bhante quite quickly saw that sustaining our practice was going to be a key issue. I feel so fortunate to have grown up in the movement at a time where it seemed that there were abundant opportunities to live such a complete Dharma life. And I feel intensely grateful to the dharma pioneers who made that possible. Again, there are now more and more opportunities emerging, but certainly not to be taken for granted. Of course, living in a Buddhist Community and working in right livelihood won't in themselves ensure that we are going beyond in our practice but give us a really good context to do so if we keep motivated and keep steering to the deep. Living together, working together or taking on projects invites all our samskaras, all our tendencies, to the party. We may have really deep insights but how fully they can impact on us and how long their influence lasts depends on how **integrated** we are and what sort of forces in our being are pulling in other directions, dancing to other tunes, or just going at different speeds. Like the crowds at a marathon race, we cheer for the front runners, but we want to get *everyone* over the line... all the walkers and limpers and charity runners in clown outfits with water pistols! For our Dharma life to have meaning and significance, for others as well as ourselves, we need to be in it for in it the long term. (And, yes, I am happy to talk about lifetimes.) For a radical and lasting transformation, work with the kleshas and samskaras is essential. The different aspects of our dharma activities and ethical life help us in this transformation. Taking on projects, friendships, confession - in fact the whole of our dharma

life - is a going beyond practice if that is our motivation for engaging in it. I am sure you are all very familiar with this, it's the life blood of the movement really. But it's worth highlighting it in this context, as it's a really powerful tool if we keep refreshing our motivation with open-hearted awareness.

Another aspect of integration that I wanted to mention in this context is Shamatha practice. I know some people have been exploring this more specifically again recently and I am really pleased it is happening. For a while for me in meditation practice dhyana was fraught with difficulty. The more I wanted to experience such states, the more will I engaged (and I have a lot!). I threw myself into the practice for a while to the exclusion of all else and wondered why I just felt more grumpy and more and more of a failure. I then decided that it was because my ethical practice was not effective enough. But however hard I tried on both fronts I couldn't seem to experience any remotely expansive states of mind and was just full of self-criticism and despondency. Eventually, I gave into meditation as just being a way of processing the day. I could say a lot more about this but for now, for anyone for whom that is ringing any bells at all, rest assured it doesn't have to be like that! We all can open to increasingly expansive states and in relation to going beyond I want to highlight two specific benefits of Shamata practice.

On an energetic level Shamatha practice can harmonise and heal. Bhante talks about vertical and horizontal integration and it can free up energy for a deeper integration of all the superficially conflicted aspects of experience. When the mind is clear and settled conceptual fabrication naturally lessens. I can have a sense of more and more of the whole being wholly attending, (to borrow from D.H. Lawrence) so when understanding arises there's less and less to block it, dilute it or take it off in other directions. There is more available to be affected and it has a correspondingly more complete and lasting effect. It is for this reason that it is traditionally suggested that we can use more absorbed states of mind to make pranidhanas - heartfelt wishes for practice or for the benefit of beings, as they will carry more weight with this level of integration.

Now, I'd like to bring us back to the dynamic model of mind and how the world we live in is a function of perception. Different states of samadhi, different dhyanas, can lead to very, very different experiences of consciousness and the world. There are apparently a vast number of these 'altered states' that have been recognised and catalogued, including those that we know of as the four or eight dhyanas, which can be entered into by setting up the right very specific conditions for each one to arise. So for me, the interest lies not so much in exploring each specific state but in recognising how deeply our construction of the world can change. It can feel like the grass, the flowers, the trees, are pouring out love from their own side. The habit of seeing with 3D perspective can dissolve, boundaries around objects disappear, location, size and time can all dissolve. And the more we experience such states ourselves, directly and in person, the more confidence we can build in the truths of the Heart Sutra. It challenges our deep assumptions that the way we see things from our deluded partial self-referential perspective is how things are. And this confidence is a huge help to our motivation for practice. A huge spur to going beyond....

In terms of going beyond with **Positive Emotion, the second aspect of the system of practice**, again there is so, so much that could be said. So many of us spend our lives living in a more and more engaged way with others because we care, because we love, because we have a sense that this is where the deepest freedom and meaning lie. Our practice of spiritual friendship and metta helps us to keep that care alive, authentic, engaged. It also gives us the conditions where we can move more and more from a perspective of me and mine to one of us and ours. Because Samsara and Nirvana are a function of perception, the more inclusive our lives, the more we live in a connected non-separated world, the more this very world becomes a lotus paradise - this very body a Buddha.

But however much we care, however engaged we are, life does not always feel like a lotus paradise. Wherever we are in the world right now, it can feel very far from that. It can quite literally feel like the world is on fire. So if we want to go beyond, go deeper in times like these, our metta practice needs to include a particular focus...

We are familiar with ***metta in relation to beings***.

It is certainly hard enough to really take others in on their own terms, to let them into our hearts, to connect and empathise and to authentically be moved by their suffering and act to alleviate it. But even this is not enough, as we have seen, no matter how we act, beings suffer, worlds burn and we can easily feel overwhelmed and impotent. In the 'Jewel Ornament of Liberation' seminar, in the chapter on benevolence and compassion, Bhante refers to the fact that we can also practice metta with the ***Dharma as reference***. Here, like in the Bodhicitta practice we reflect on the fact that these beings who we so passionately want to help, in the words of Machig Labdron a C13th yogini, 'don't understand that all phenomena lack even a hair's tip of true existence, that they are like a dream and an illusion, holding on to the truths of confused appearances, they create unvirtuous karma and experience the consequences, unbearable suffering.' It's by freeing them from this deep self-referencing that the deeper causes of suffering, which cause the world to relight its fires, will be addressed.

There is a sense of the real patience, nobility, flexibility of heart and mind of the Bodhisattva, full of understanding, of the complexity of human existence and the suffering that arises. And at the same time, love completely undiminished, remaining connected and remaining spacious in the face of this, interested - even bringing relief, lightness, joy to the situation.

Practically, going beyond with metta and bodhicitta will involve all the practice concerned with strengthening our love and care and beneficial activity on the one hand, and, on the other, deepening our understanding and experience of the way things are - building up both of these aspects until they naturally arise together.

So we are already moving into the **territory of insight, the third aspect of the system of practice**, the territory of working with the Jnyeyavarana - the veil of those fundamental obscuring views, those deep assumptions that keep us building the prison walls. And this is central to the practice of going beyond.

Bhante has outlined various 'insight' practices including the Six Element practice, the Contemplation of the Nidana chain, and the Contemplation of the Root Verses from the

Bardo Thodol. He also mentions Chod practice, Contemplation of Decomposition of the Corpse, and the Lakshanas, which we looked at earlier.

All of these have their place, methods are very helpful, but what fundamentally brings about insight is an aliveness to the underlying assumptions on which we construct our deluded view of the world. We need to address the root causes of ignorance, the third and deepest level of dukkha, skandha dukkha - the dukkha created by holding on to an idea of our separate selfhood and all that arises out of that. The dukkha of ignoring, holding out against the dynamic, ungraspable flow of life, and of trying to control or fight it. It's the practice of addressing the deepest causes of suffering, **directly looking at ignorance**.

And although it's helpful to loosen the grip of *all* our habitual tendencies, it's these deep views, the jneyavarana: 'I have a body' 'I am separate from the world', 'I am going to die', etc - which hold the fabric and structure of our world together and which ultimately cause the most suffering. This is because they cause us to rebuild our protective habits and tendencies if they are not freed. As Bhante says - we can move the furniture around in the room of our superficial behaviour but that won't actually remove the prison walls unless we change the basic structure of the house.

We can't really have a guidebook here, a map of mystery! But with practice and increasing confidence in the taste, the texture of just how it is, we can build our intuition, our feel for the dukkha or tension in body speech and mind which obscures the freedom. It is possible to get a feel for where and how we are holding on, constructing, fabricating, even at the deepest levels. This moment, right now, is so much more than what we might describe as personal experience. When we open up in all the senses, it includes so much sound, vibration, sensation, visual stimulation, resonance. We can let the focus shift from the content, the story of what's happening **to its nature**. We can feel the vibrancy and aliveness, even enjoy the creative capacity of awareness and its mysterious unfolding. If we find ourselves getting caught up in story, we can drop in subtle micro reflections: 'When is the past or future happening', 'Does there need to be an I to be experiencing right now?' 'Inside or outside?', or, as we get a more of a sense for what the words are pointing to, even just 'Where, Who and What' will do. **Above all these questions don't need answers**, their sole

purpose is to open things up and reduce the fabricating as we notice how well it all functions without our usual reference points. We get more interested in what is constant and true of all experience, the quality of it that is always there. The underlying universal mechanisms that cause the suffering become apparent. Once these mechanisms show themselves fully, and we experience them directly as suffering, they cannot persist because it takes our active involvement to recreate them afresh in each moment.

To take the example of unhooking from the Trimandala again. We can feel how a view that organises experience into a perceiving subject confronted by a separate object always produces a problematic relationship between the two of them. We can feel how we need to have all three elements in place: separate subject and object and an idea about how they relate to one another, to produce tension. And, how, if we unhook from any one aspect - me, other or investment in the story - the delusion as a whole is weakened.

As you are sitting here listening to this talk you will have your own experience of curiosity, boredom, enjoyment, confusion and you could deal with that by attending more *or* by walking out - which quickly takes away the object - the trigger for the boredom. But you could also take it as an opportunity to notice how you are creating a trimandala right now out of a string of sights and sounds, physical sensations and mental movements. Feeling into, even unhooking from the trigger - from the 'me' experiencing or the story of the response.

In relation to the fourth aspect of the system of practice, **spiritual rebirth**, Bhante comments:

'Insight arises through visualisation of a Buddha or Bodhisattva, not because it is an image of the transcendental, but through recognising what it is – both real and unreal. '

Both real and unreal – **we are in the territory here of appearance/emptiness**. Yes, as the fabrication lessens we see there is no own being anywhere, no solidity, nothing even that *is* flow or *has* consciousness, nothing that comes or goes, but in a way is still real in the sense that there is sharpness, distinctiveness and aliveness of experience, This is sometimes

referred to as luminosity but not so much in the sense of light, more in the sense of being clearly apparent. Just as the barking of a dog is distinct and has an impact, the appearance of the Yidam is full of colour, qualities and energy and all that impacts us. This impact and influence grows the more we open to it but at the same time is completely fabricated and has no solid being. The point here is not that it is valueless because it is artificial but that it is communicating something about the nature of **all** experience - dogs, dinner, lovers, war – all are both real and unreal.

Finding an authentic connection with the yidams, these messengers from beyond, keeps our hearts, our 'souls', engaged and stimulates our imagination. It activates different aspects of our being and allows us to resonate with deep truths in a very complete and satisfying way. Again, we can bring even more of us to the party.

The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas demonstrate for us what is it like to live without craving.

Living embodiments of awake-ness. How would that be in colour, sound, qualities, creative symbols?

The encounter with each specific figure has a very specific impact on perception. With each one a very particular texture of reality is strongly evoked, although it is of course completely unwordable and they all have the taste of freedom! Again, we can get a glimpse of how profoundly, how radically, the world changes with these shifts in perception. And when we spend time in such different worlds it will rub off in ways we may not rationally understand or even directly notice. It goes beyond a personal connection. Like in the entreaty and supplication section of the Puja - I like to feel that honouring these Awareness qualities, however we do that, taps into a vast ageless flow of blessings and makes it possible for that to have an influence in our Saha world.

Practically speaking the way that we do this will be a very personal thing but for me the practices of sadhana, mantra and engaging in creative rituals are among Bhante's most profound and far reaching gifts.

So we have had many words and come a long way but of course we haven't actually gone anywhere at all! Where and who is there to go? Maybe our hearts have responded to Bhante's setting off on his and our journey 75 years ago. Maybe, we, like him, have a glimpse, a taste of the mystery to be lived beyond all these words. The more confidence we can build in that, the more these deepest levels of construction, of fabricating, fall away. And if we don't cling or identify, we don't even need to avoid fabricating, which can be there or not, our only problem is identifying with it.

Here we enter the territory of the last stage of the system of practice, **Spiritual receptivity**: We can let wisdom and compassion meditate, no need to hold ourselves separate from them. Love with no reference, no beings, no dharma, no label 'love'. We have gone beyond any sense of 'going beyond'. We can come home. We can come home to loving awareness, its mysterious unfolding, the naked experience of how things are - Sunyata sunyata. Without fighting the constant change and ungraspability it becomes our deepest refuge, our most secure home and the only thing we can really rely on. And as well as being the most secure, it is also the most unlimited, it is the bodhicitta, it includes all beings. As the sign (on the door of this house I showed you at the start of this talk) says: **Everyone** *is welcome to enter and be free.*