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THE BODHISATTVA IDEAL

1

The Bodhisattva Vow



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Cover Symbol:

The symbols on the covers of the issues in this series are from original lino-cuts by Dharmachari Alokā based upon the *mudrās* of the eight principal Bodhisattvas of Mahayana tradition. This issue features the *mudrā* of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the 'Lord who looks down', the embodiment of Compassion. His left hand is shown here holding a lotus flower, the symbol of spiritual unfoldment.

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3 The Bodhisattva Vow

Part 1

Contents

Editorial	3
Lecture	4
Seminar Extracts	13
1 A Vow or Just a Change of Diet?.....	13
2 An Extra Reminder	15
3 Something To Stick To	16
4 Can We Take it Literally?	17
5 A Bodhisattva's Willing	18
6 Saving Mind Beings.....	20
7 When There's No Need for a Vow	22
Glossary	26
Notes	29

* Indicates refer to Glossary

Editorial

Have you ever tried to do the impossible? At the start of his career the Bodhisattva takes on what to an ordinary human being would appear to be an impossible task — to deliver all beings from suffering and to lead them to Buddhahood. It is not just with 'good intentions' that the Bodhisattva takes on this great task — he vows to see it through. The Bodhisattva's Vow is the natural expression of the Will to Enlightenment and can therefore only be made once the Bodhicitta has arisen.

But what about the ordinary human beings or the aspiring Bodhisattvas like ourselves? How do we approach the Vow if our Bodhi Hearts have not yet awoken? Will our further exploration of the Bodhisattva Ideal leave us merely with theory or will it prove to be of practical application?

On the 18th anniversary of the Western Buddhist Order Vajraketu gave a talk entitled 'Responding to the Cries of the World'. He presented a vivid picture of the appalling state of the world and he gave us a glimpse of the altruism that is required in order to remedy it. He inspired his audience to attempt the impossible. Without even mentioning the Vow Vajraketu led us towards a deeper understanding of its implications in terms of 'responding to the objective needs of a situation'.

If we have ever felt the desire to do more than we imagined ourselves capable we have, on our own level, embarked on the Path of the Bodhisattva. Then we must actually take on a little more until eventually we realize 'the more we do, the more we can do'. We will have extended ourselves beyond the realms of possibility and the Bodhisattva Vow can become a realistic undertaking.

SRIMALA

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In preparing the lecture for publication in this issue of *Mitrata* the Venerable Sangharakshita has recast a part of it in order to make the meaning clearer.

Lecture

Tonight we are concerned with 'The Bodhisattva Vow'. The Bodhisattva Vow is one of the most important, practical aspects of the Mahayana tradition. In a sense, tonight's talk is a direct continuation of last week's. Last week we saw that the Bodhicitta has two aspects. There's first of all the Absolute Bodhicitta: identical with Enlightenment, identical with Reality, above and beyond time and space. Then there is the relative Bodhicitta: the Bodhicitta which manifests 'within' the stream of time. Now the relative Bodhicitta in turn has two aspects. These are known respectively as the 'vow aspect' and the 'establishment aspect'. The establishment aspect refers to what are known as the 'Six *Pāramitās*', or the six transcendental virtues, the practice of which carries the Bodhisattva to supreme Enlightenment. The 'Six *Pāramitās*' are: Giving (or Generosity), Uprightness, Patience, Vigour (or Energy), Meditation, and Wisdom. These six transcendental virtues will be dealt with in the next three lectures. This evening we are concerned with the first of the two aspects of the relative Bodhicitta, the vow aspect.

The question which arises is, of course: What does the Mahayana mean when it speaks of the Bodhisattva's Vow? The word in the original Sanskrit is *praṇidhāna*. *Praṇidhāna* means 'vow', 'inflexible resolution', 'determination', 'pledge', and so on. It is understood to be something very solemn and special; also something public, not private; and something irrevocable -- something which when it has been made can never, under any circumstance, be withdrawn. We may even describe the Bodhisattva's Vow as a sort of promise which the Bodhisattva makes at the commencement of his career upon the arising of the Bodhicitta within him. It is a promise made to the universe at large — or to all sentient beings. This is the word meaning — what the word *praṇidhāna* means. But the word meaning does not help us very much in understanding the truth of the matter, so let us now look into it a little more deeply.

We saw, last week, that the Bodhicitta represents a sort of cosmic will to universal redemption. Its manifestation in the individual, in dependence on the appropriate conditions, is what is known technically as 'the arising of the Bodhicitta'. Now, as we also saw, the Bodhicitta itself is not individual, but universal; there's only one Bodhicitta in which all Bodhisattvas participate. But this one Bodhicitta — 'one' though it is — manifests in individuals. Not only does the one Bodhicitta manifest in individuals, but it also expresses itself through them. This expression of the Bodhicitta through the individual, this individual expression, as it were, of the Bodhicitta, is what is known as 'the Bodhisattva's Vow'. The Vow, therefore, may be defined as the concrete, practical expression of the Bodhicitta in the life and work of the individual Bodhisattva. This expression is not single; it's multiform. Traditionally we do indeed speak of the Bodhisattva's Vow, but the Vow is, in fact, a set of vows. We can now begin to see the difference between the Bodhicitta on the one hand and the Bodhisattva's Vow on the other. The Bodhicitta is one, and different Bodhisattvas participate in it; but the vows are individual: the vows reflect the Bodhisattva's special interests and aptitudes within the framework of the Bodhicitta and the wider framework of the Bodhisattva Ideal itself.

At this point, as this may begin to sound a little abstruse, a comparison may possibly help. We may say that the Bodhisattva himself is like a glass prism. The Bodhicitta is like pure white light shining through the prism. The vows of the Bodhisattva are like the different, coloured lights which emerge from the prism on the other side. Thus there are three things: the prism, representing the Bodhisattva; the pure white light shining in, representing the Bodhicitta; and all the colours of the rainbow shining out, representing the Bodhisattva's Vow.

We can pursue this sort of comparison even further. We can go so far as to say that this pure white light of the relative Bodhicitta streams from the sun of the Absolute Bodhicitta. And we can further say that this pure white light of this one Bodhicitta shines through hundreds and thousands of individual prisms. As it shines through them all each one produces its own particular combination of colours. We know, of course, only seven colours of the rainbow, but in some kinds of meditation we try to visualize colours which as yet we don't know. So if we can think of all these prisms — as the white light shines through them — emitting not just the seven colours that we know, but hundreds of thousands of wonderful colours that we don't know, then perhaps we shall get some idea of how this one Bodhicitta shines through the minds of different Bodhisattvas producing all these innumerable combinations of vows.

We see, in this way, that provision is made both for unity and for variety. We see that the Bodhisattvas all participate in one Bodhicitta (this is the source of their unity). But it manifests itself in them all in different ways. Each Bodhisattva expresses that one Bodhicitta in his or her own way. This individual expression — in terms of life, work, career, and activities — is what we call the Bodhisattva's Vow.

We usually think of a vow as something verbal, rather like the oath you take in court. But the Vow is not just a verbal expression. It's not just that the Bodhisattva says, "I will do *this*, and I will do *that*". The Vow is an expression in terms of the life and work and activity of the Bodhisattva. It is not just a question of the Bodhisattva's conscious intention. To change the metaphor, we may say that the vows of the Bodhisattva are so many sparks struck from the Bodhisattva's total being — not just from his mind or will, but from his total being — under the tremendous impact of the Bodhicitta.

The Mahayana scriptures make mention of a number of different sets of vows. Some of these sets of vows are associated with the names of various great Bodhisattvas. For instance, there are the celebrated forty-eight vows of the Bodhisattva Dharmākara (who became the Buddha Amitābha, the Buddha of Infinite Light). These forty-eight vows are enumerated at length in the *Large Sukhāvatī-vyūha Sūtra*. (*Sukhāvatī-vyūha Sūtra* means the 'Sutra of the Adornment of the Land of Bliss'). Again, the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* (the 'Sutra on the Ten Stages of the Bodhisattva's Path') mentions ten great vows. These ten great vows of the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* have been summarized as follows: (1) to provide for the worship of all the Buddhas without exception; (2) to maintain the religious discipline that has been taught by all the Buddhas, and to preserve the teaching of the Buddhas; (3) to see all the incidents in the earthly career of a Buddha; (4) to realize the Thought of Enlightenment, to practise the duties of a Bodhisattva, to acquire all the *pāramitās*, and purify all the stages of his career; (5) to mature all beings and establish them in the knowledge of the Buddha, viz. all the four classes of beings¹ who are in the six states of existence;² (6) to perceive the whole universe; (7) to purify and cleanse all Buddha-fields;³ (8) to enter on the Great Way (the Mahayana), and to produce a common thought and purpose in all Bodhisattvas; (9) to make all actions of the body, speech, and mind fruitful and successful; (10) to attain the supreme and perfect Enlightenment, and to preach the doctrine. All these ten vows of the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* are clearly different aspects of the Bodhisattva's one determination to gain Enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

Well-known as these sets of forty-eight and often are, perhaps the most famous set of Bodhisattva's vows is the set of 'The Four Great Vows'. These 'Four Great Vows' of the Bodhisattva are recited daily throughout the Far East: in China (at least they used to be recited in China — one doesn't quite know now), Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Tibet, Vietnam, and so on. These 'Four Great Vows' are usually given as follows: (1) May I deliver all beings from difficulties; (2) May I eradicate all defilements; (3) May I master all *dharmas*; (4) May I lead all beings to Buddhahood.

Let us try to understand some at least of the implications of these vows. But before we do that I would like to make one comment. I've observed that these 'Four Great Vows' are recited daily throughout the Far East, which suggests that every Bodhisattva or would-be Bodhisattva, makes the same four vows. But it isn't quite like that. The 'Four Great Vows' obviously comprehend the spiritual aspirations of many people, but one is not necessarily obliged to adopt this particular set, or any other set, even though found in the scriptures. Any individual Bodhisattva — the scriptures make this quite clear — is free to formulate his own set of vows, if he or she so wishes, in accordance with his or her own particular aspirations, within, of course, the general framework of the Bodhisattva Ideal itself. The main consideration is that the vows should be universal in scope. This is the common characteristic of all these vows. They don't have reference to mean, or petty, or immediate objectives, but to something ultimate, something remote, something universal.

Now for the 'Four Great Vows' themselves.

1. May I deliver all beings from difficulties

You will notice that the Bodhisattva starts at the beginning. Here by 'difficulties' is meant worldly difficulties. It's as though whoever framed these vows said to the would-be Bodhisattva, "Forget for the

moment about helping people spiritually. That is very difficult indeed." It is very difficult indeed to help other people spiritually even if one is qualified to give spiritual help, as occasionally is the case. Many people indeed do ask for spiritual help, but even when someone is qualified to give it very few people are able really to receive it and act upon it. Therefore the Bodhisattva begins, as it were, in a small way — because everybody can give, to some extent, material, tangible help and assistance to other people. It is said, under the heading of this particular vow, that the Bodhisattva, or the would-be Bodhisattva, should be sympathetic and helpful in the affairs of everyday life. The Bodhisattva should do, on all occasions, whatever he or she can do to help: be friendly, co-operative, helpful, and so on. There's no need to go into details because I think everybody understands the sort of attitude that is meant here. The only thing I want to add to this is that when the Bodhisattva's Vow speaks of 'delivering all beings from difficulties' it is understood that 'beings' includes not just human beings, but even animals as well.

Those who take the Bodhisattva Vow seriously should not be satisfied just being helpful in this way in the affairs of everyday life, useful and necessary though that is. They should be prepared to go a little further, should be prepared to go even a little out of their way to help those in difficulties. In this connection I'd like to suggest four kinds of people in difficulties we can particularly help today. First of all, those who are now euphemistically called 'senior citizens' — not that that makes it any easier for them. Lots of our senior citizens have to live alone, and they not unnaturally often feel lonely or neglected. So here is a whole class of people who are in difficulties of some kind — maybe nothing very serious or acute, but certainly very often lonely, friendless, and feeling perhaps very much neglected. One who takes the Bodhisattva Vow seriously could very well make a point of trying to establish contact with one, or two, or three old people in the neighbourhood and maintaining a friendly human contact and relationship with them, which will obviously do them a very great deal of good.

And then, secondly, there are the sick. Not just those who are down with 'flu for a couple of days', but especially those who are confined to hospital, sometimes with very serious, painful diseases, for long periods of time. It often happens that even their closest relations, after a while, begin to forget. They think, "Well, I can go next week or the week after. After all, old so-and-so's there all the time; he won't go away; I can go and see him any day". So what happens? In the end they don't go at all, and the weeks and months slip by. It may be your own brother or sister, your own father or mother, uncle or aunt, but, strange as it may seem, very often you just don't go along. Hence there is a very great deal of work which can be done in this particular field, with people of this sort. Many of these people in hospital, especially those who have been there a long time, and especially those who are also old, have no relations or friends to go and visit them. Thus here too there is something very practical and concrete which we can do.

Then, a third class of persons, are people in prison. It may not be possible for us to visit them personally, but at least we can write. Quite a lot of prisoners appreciate people writing to them and helping them to keep in touch with the world outside, and making them feel that they still in a sense belong to that world to which, one day, they will have, in most cases, to go back. This is another kind of person in difficulties that we can very easily help.

And then, fourthly, I would suggest the psychologically disturbed: those who are neurotic, mentally unbalanced, or suffering mentally in one way or another. Many of them may need 'expert help'. Here we certainly shouldn't try to venture into a field in which we are not really qualified; though, at the same time, I cannot help thinking that the 'expert help' — from all that one hears about shock therapy in hospitals, for instance — sometimes makes things worse instead of better. In fact, I might even go so far as to say, as a result of my own contact with this particular field, that I am convinced that there is no psychological solution for psychological problems. In the long run there is only a spiritual solution.

It wasn't so many weeks ago that I read — I think it was in the *Evening Standard* — a report which stated that in the year 1967, in this country, five thousand young people committed suicide. (I wasn't able to verify that figure, but I suppose it's more or less accurate; a hundred or two more or less doesn't make it any less shocking.) If one has a little imagination and thinks about this, what does it mean? It means that in that one year five thousand young people, who ought to have been on the threshold of their lives, looking forward to the future, were so overcome by problems and difficulties (largely mental, I should imagine) that they

felt they had no alternative but to opt out — in other words, to commit suicide. A case by case study might make very interesting and revealing reading. No indication was given as to what their reasons might have been, but obviously the five thousand young people who ended their lives in that way were under very considerable stress. And one cannot help thinking that, had some friendly person been at hand at the appropriate moment, quite a number of those who did commit suicide might have been saved. Here is a whole field of work. Here is a whole class of people in difficulties, or potentially in difficulties, who can be helped — the mentally disturbed, especially the mentally disturbed younger people.

These are four classes of people in difficulties which I've suggested as very proper objects of the Bodhisattva's help, if he takes his first Great Vow seriously: the old, the sick, the prisoners, and the psychologically disturbed. But we can go even farther afield than this. We can help refugees, the homeless, the starving, the underprivileged, in all countries of the world. This sort of thing, however, is very difficult to do directly; not everybody can just up and go away to Africa or India and help. If we want to help at all we usually have to do it indirectly through a charitable organization, though many of us are not a little suspicious of organized charity. One sees that a large proportion of the funds subscribed are absorbed by administrative expenses etc., so that only a small proportion reaches the people for whom the money was intended. So perhaps personal action is best. I remember a story in this connection concerning one of our own Friends. He isn't here tonight but I can just tell this little story about him.

This particular Friend of ours was very much concerned with the problem of race relations. He felt that he had to do something about it. He was a rather active sort of person, and a good speaker, and having been politically involved in the past he thought at first that he might join some organization and, perhaps, carry out some militant action. But then he thought, "No, that doesn't really do any good. If I really believe in inter-racial harmony I should begin by practising it myself." Since he happened to have a spare room in his house, he advertised that he was willing to put up any coloured student. He got several coloured students in succession (I think most of them were university students from America). He said that it was a very interesting experience indeed adjusting his own relations with these people, and really learning to live in harmony, friendship, and understanding with a person of another colour. So this is the sort of attitude I feel that we should adopt: not thinking in terms of sending out help to remote areas, or doing something highly organized, militant, and dramatic, but helping people personally and directly, within the context of our own immediate lives.

This, then, is the first Great Vow of the Bodhisattva: May I deliver all beings from difficulties. These are just a few of the ways in which some of us can deliver some other people from at least some of their difficulties. These remarks are obviously only suggestive, not definitive; there's so much that can be done if only we have the heart. This is the first thing that the Bodhisattva sets himself to do: to help living beings in immediate, practical, material difficulties. He doesn't at this stage presume to think of helping them spiritually — leading them to Enlightenment. At this stage he thinks, "It is enough if I can just give them a helping hand in the affairs of everyday life."

2. May I eradicate all defilements

Here two questions arise. Firstly, what are the defilements, and secondly, how are they to be eradicated? The term 'defilements' covers all negative emotions, psychological conditionings, prejudices, preconceptions, or in other words, all that binds us to the Wheel of Life⁴ and makes it revolve yet again. There are several, traditional lists of these defilements. For instance, there's the list of what are known as the 'Three Unwholesome Roots': Craving, Hatred, and Ignorance. They are symbolized by the cock, the snake, and the pig of the Tibetan Wheel of Life. When you see this vividly depicted Tibetan Wheel of Life, with its circles and subdivisions, you see these three animals right in the centre, at the very heart of the Wheel — the wheel of our own lives. The cock represents craving, the snake hatred, and the pig ignorance.

Another list of defilements is that of the 'Five *Nivaranas*'. *Nivarana* (literally 'covering') is usually rendered as 'hindrance'. These 'Five Hindrances' are: craving, hatred, restlessness and anxiety, sloth and torpor, and indecision.⁵

Perhaps the most useful list of defilements is that known as the 'Five Poisons': distraction, anger, craving, conceit, and ignorance. While I am on the subject, it occurs to me that this word 'poison' isn't used accidentally. The negative emotions are poisons quite literally. If you indulge in negative emotions you're poisoning your whole system, not only in the metaphorical sense, but even quite literally. I remember, in this connection, some rather horrifying experiments which were carried out in the United States. (I don't know why it is, but all these interesting experiments seem to be carried out in the United States, and one reads about them two or three years later in the *Readers Digest*.) The experimenter made a number of people angry in the laboratory and then popped a bag over their mouth and nostrils. As they breathed in and out a slight film was deposited on the bag. He kept on doing this, and when the film was thick enough it was scraped off. It was brown in colour, and found to be a deadly poison. So, apparently, all the negative emotions are quite literally poisonous, and when we indulge in them we quite literally poison our own system. You might even have noticed yourselves sometimes that when you're overpowered by a very powerful negative emotion, especially that of anger or hatred, you get a sharp, stabbing pain either in the stomach or in the heart. This is the poison as it were eating into your vitals. So it is no accident that this particular list of the defilements refers to the 'Five Poisons' — they're quite literally poisonous. We're poisoning ourselves all the time we are indulging in distraction, anger, craving, conceit, and ignorance.

The defilements can be eradicated in a number of different ways; but the best thing to do is to attack them at source. In this connection the Buddha gives an illustration. He says, "Suppose there's a gang of robbers operating in the kingdom, how does the king go about destroying them? He finds their hide-out and destroys it; then the robbers can no longer operate." Similarly with the defilements: you have to find their hide-out; you have to attack them, and root them out, at source. Their source, of course, is in the mind. That's where they are to be eradicated. One does that through meditation: meditation helps to eradicate the defilements.

As some of you know, in the Buddhist tradition there are five basic meditation exercises, each of which is an antidote to one or another of the 'Five Poisons'. First of all, the poison of **distraction**, or the tendency of the mind to jump about from this to that. We speak of people having a 'grasshopper mind', or a 'butterfly mind', by which we mean that they are unable to settle on one thing for any length of time. It's a matter of being — in T. S. Eliot's famous line — 'distracted from distraction by distraction'. That just about summarizes modern life; it is a constant process — every day, every week — of being 'distracted from distraction by distraction'. The antidote to this, at least as a mental state, is the Mindfulness of Breathing.* I don't think that there is any need for me to describe the practice; it's familiar to most of us because in the FWBO we practise it in all our meditation classes.⁶ One-pointed concentration on the breathing process is the antidote to all our distractions.

The second of the 'Five Poisons' is **anger**. This is said to be the most un-Bodhisattva-like of all defilements: you can give way to craving, or steal, or tell a lie, and in your heart of hearts you may still be a Bodhisattva; but if you really lose your temper, then bang goes all your Bodhisattvahood — you have to start all over again, because anger is directly opposed to compassion. One of the works quoted in the *Śikṣā-samuccaya*⁷ says (in effect), "Here are you promising to deliver all beings, and to be kind and compassionate to them, and then what do you go and do? You go and get angry with one of them! So there really isn't much substance in your Bodhisattva Ideal or your Bodhisattva Vow." Therefore the Bodhisattva is advised to avoid anger at all costs. The antidote to anger is again quite simple. It's the Metta Bhavana,* the development of universal loving-kindness: the beautiful practice which so many of us find extremely difficult. But, though difficult it's familiar because this too we practise in our meditation classes. And many people do know from their own experience, at least from time to time, that this particular negative emotion of anger can be dispelled through this particular practice — the deliberate, mindful development of love and good will towards all living beings. Thus one eradicates the poison of anger through developing universal loving-kindness.

Thirdly, we come to **craving**. In a sense it is the Poison *par excellence*. It is not just 'desire' but what we may describe as 'neurotic desire'. Take, for instance, the case of food — without being philosophical — just ordinary food. We all have a desire for food and enjoy eating it — this is quite normal and healthy. But the desire for food becomes neurotic when we try to use food as a substitute satisfaction for some other need,

whether mental or emotional. Only last night I was reading a report by a writer for girls' magazines to the effect that many girls who read the magazines wrote in to say that when faced by emotional problems they felt an uncontrollable urge to eat sweets. This is a neurotic desire. In other words, it's a craving.

As we can see, only too easily, craving is quite a problem, especially in modern times. There's a whole vast industry geared to the stimulation of our craving and to nothing else. This is, of course, the industry — or whatever you like to call it — of advertising. It is geared to persuading us, with or without our knowledge, that we 'must' have this, that, or the other. In fact, we may say that advertising is one of the most unethical of all the professions.

Craving can be eradicated by various practices. I'll mention just a few of them. (You can see how big the problem is from the number of the antidotes.) Some of the antidotes, I must warn you in advance, are quite drastic. For instance, contemplation of the ten stages of decomposition of a corpse. This is still quite a popular practice in some Buddhist countries. It is said to be especially good as an antidote for sexual craving, in other words for neurotic sexual desire. I won't describe the stages one by one that might be a little too much for some of you.

If one can't go the whole hog there is a milder version of this practice: meditating in a cremation ground. In India, as you probably know, they don't usually bury, they usually cremate, and a special area called a cremation ground or a burning ground is set aside for this purpose — very often on the banks of a river. One is advised to go there at night, alone, and to sit and meditate. I can assure you that these cremation grounds are not always very pretty places, at least by day. There are fragments of charred bone and charred cloth lying about, and usually there is quite a stench of burning human flesh in the air. But, it can be a very beneficial and interesting, and even I would say exhilarating, practice.

I had one experience of this myself many years ago, on the banks of the River Ganges, not far from Lucknow. There was a beautiful stretch of silver sand that was used as a cremation ground, and it was the night of the full moon. Everything was completely silvered over, and one could just make out the low mounds here and there on the sand where cremations had been held. Little bits of bone and pieces of skull lay scattered around. It was very quiet and peaceful, and one really felt quite away from the world. There was nothing depressing about the experience at all; one can only say that it was exhilarating. One felt, as I say, away from it all, almost as though one's own cremation had already taken place. In this connection it is interesting that when a Hindu becomes an orthodox sannyasin he performs his own funeral service, going through the motions of cremating himself. The idea is that when one becomes a sannyasin, and gives up the world, one is civilly dead and no longer exists so far as the world is concerned. This is the last thing he does before donning his yellow robe. This association of death with renunciation and the eradication of all worldly cravings represents the same sort of idea.

If even an occasional visit to the graveyard is too much (it may be too much for quite a lot of people), and one wants a still milder form of the same kind of practice, one can simply meditate on death: that death is inevitable, that it comes to everybody in due course, and that none can escape it. Since it must come, why not make the best possible use of one's life? Why devote one's life to unworthy ends? Why indulge in miserable cravings which don't bring any satisfaction and happiness in the long run? In this way one meditates upon the idea of death. This is an antidote for craving in general, whether for possessions or success or pleasure.

One can also meditate upon impermanence: that everything is impermanent, that nothing lasts (whether it is the solar system or your own breath); from instant to instant everything is changing. One remembers that everything is going to pass away just like clouds drifting through the sky. This meditation has the same general effect as the other practices I have mentioned. One can't hang on very determinedly to things when one knows that sooner or later one is going to have to give them up.

There is another kind of practice. This consists in what is known as 'the contemplation of the loathsomeness of food'. I'm not going into the details of this practice either, because they are rather

unpleasant and have been made so quite deliberately. But this practice is very good for young ladies who are neurotically addicted to sweets.

Out of the various antidotes to craving one should select the exercise suited to one's need. If one feels that craving is very strong, and really has one in its grip, then by all means just grit your teeth and go off to the cremation ground and, if you can find a corpse or something reminiscent of death, even if it's only a bone or two, dwell upon the idea of death. Some people familiarize themselves with this idea by keeping skulls and bone around them.

After all, what is there to be afraid of? In my flat at Highgate⁸ I've got a highly polished old skull-cup. One day a lady came to tea, and was asking about my Tibetan things. She told me she loved everything Tibetan, so I said to her, "Would you like to see *this*?" and put it into her hand. She nearly dropped it, as though it had been a live coal. She said, "Oh, but it's a skull!" I said, "Of course it is: the Tibetans are always using them." Tibetans, I would say, are very fond of these things. They're very fond of anything made out of human bone or a human skull. They like rosaries made out of bits of human bone; they like thighbone trumpets; and they like skull-cups. This is because they take a quite natural, common-sense view of death. They don't think there is anything morbid or macabre in it as we do. We've been brought up in the wrong way. We've been brought up in the Christian tradition in which the word 'death' sends a shiver down one's spine. But this isn't the Buddhist way of looking at it. Death is something just as natural as life. I often quote, in this connection, those very beautiful words of the great modern Bengali poet, Tagore:⁹ 'I know I shall love death because I have loved life.' He sees life and death as the two facets of the same thing, so that if you love life you will love death. This is paradoxical but true.

It is now time for us to pass on to the fourth of the Poisons, which is **conceit**. The original term is sometimes translated as 'pride' but I think 'conceit' is better. We all know about conceit from our own experience and I need not say very much about it. Conceit may be described as one's experience of oneself as separate, not only separate but isolated, not only isolated but *superior*.

The antidote for this poison of conceit is meditation on the six elements. The six elements are earth, water, fire, air, ether or space (*ākāśa* in Sanskrit), and consciousness, and these are represented by various geometrical forms which build up into a stupa.* Earth is represented by a cube, which is the base of the stupa; water by a sphere, which rests on the cube; fire by a cone on top of the sphere; air by an inverted bowl (symbolizing the firmament); ether by a flame in that bowl, and consciousness by the space in which the whole arrangement stands. The stupa has a great symbolical significance, the forms representing the six elements being arranged in order of increasing subtlety — the grossest at the bottom and the subtlest at the top.

How does one do this meditation? First one meditates upon earth. One reflects, "In my physical body there is the solid element, earth, in the form of flesh, bone and so on. And where does this come from? It comes from the earth element in the universe, from the solid matter in the universe. When I die, what is going to happen? My flesh, bone and so on are going to disintegrate and go back to the earth element in the universe: 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.'" One thinks and reflects in this way — though this is just an outline of the meditation, which is much more elaborate.

Then one takes up the water element in one's physical body, thinking, "In me there is blood, sweat, tears, and so on. This is the water element. Where does this water element in me come from? It is not my own; it doesn't really belong to me. It came from the water around: from the rain, from the seas, from the streams. One day I shall have to render it back. One day the liquid element in me will flow back into the liquid element in the universe."

Then one meditates upon the element fire (still more subtle). One reflects, "In me there is heat, there is warmth. Where does this come from? What is the great source of heat for the whole solar system? It's the sun. Without the sun the entire solar system would be cold and dark. So the warmth in me comes from *that* source. And when I die, what will happen? Heat — which is one of the last things to leave the body — will withdraw from my limbs until in the end there is just a little hot spot at the top of the head. When that

disappears I shall be dead. The heat element in me will have returned to the reservoir of heat and light for the whole universe." This is how one meditates on the element of fire, reflecting that that too has been borrowed for a while and must be rendered back.

Then one thinks of air. "What is the air element in me? It's the air in my lungs. I'm taking it in and giving it back every instant. It doesn't *really* belong to me. None of the elements belongs to me, but in the case of the breath I have it only for a few instants at a time. One day I'm going to breathe in and breathe out, breathe in and breathe out ... and then not breathe in again any more. I will have given my breath back finally. I will be dead. My breath won't belong to me then, so it doesn't really belong to me even now."

Then one meditates upon ether or space. One reflects, "My physical body occupies a certain space. But when that body disintegrates what becomes of the limited space it formerly occupied? It merges with the infinite space around or, in other words, disappears."

And then, what about consciousness? You reflect, "At present my consciousness is associated with the physical body, and with the space occupied by that body. When the body ceases to exist, and the space it formerly occupied merges with infinite space, what will become of that limited consciousness? It will become unlimited. It will become free. When I die physically I will experience, just for an instant, that unlimited consciousness. When I 'die' spiritually my consciousness will finally transcend all limitations whatsoever and I will experience complete freedom." In this way one meditates upon consciousness.

This is only a summary, but it may give you some idea of how one meditates upon the six elements of earth, water, fire, air, ether and consciousness. Meditating in this way one applies the antidote to the poison of conceit. One progressively dissociates oneself from the material body made up of the gross elements, from the space occupied by that body, and from the limited consciousness associated with that body and that space. Thus one becomes totally free: one becomes Enlightened.

The meditation on the six elements is a very important practice, as you have probably gathered already. It is well symbolized by the stupa consisting of five geometrical forms superimposed one upon another. There are variants of the practice. One can visualize the forms as coloured. The cube or square will then be yellow, the sphere white or blue, and so on. In this way one can vary the practice, making it easier and perhaps more congenial.

The fifth Poison is that of **ignorance**. Here is meant spiritual ignorance, or unawareness of Reality — in a sense, the basic defilement. The antidote for this is meditation on the 'links' (*nidānas*) of conditioned co-production. There are twenty-four of these, twelve worldly, pertaining to the cyclical order of existence, and twelve spiritual, pertaining to the spiral order of existence. While the first twelve represent the Wheel of Life, the second twelve represent the stages of the Path. One set corresponds to the reactive mind, the other to the creative mind. There is no time to describe all this in detail this evening. We have here the subject matter for several lectures, and I have in fact often spoken on these things before.¹⁰

These are the five basic meditations: mindfulness of breathing, which is the antidote to the poison of distraction; development of universal loving-kindness, which is the antidote to the poison of anger; various forms of meditation on impermanence, death, impurity, and so on, all of which are antidotes to the poison of craving; meditation on the six elements, the antidote to conceit; and meditation on the *nidānas*, the antidote to spiritual ignorance. With the help of these five basic meditations the Bodhisattva eradicates the defilements and thus fulfils the second of his 'Four Great Vows.'

3. May I master all dharmas

I'm going to deal with this and the following vow somewhat more briefly than I dealt with the first two. By *dharmas* here is meant, primarily, the teachings of the Buddha, as contained within the scriptures of the Hinayana and of the Mahayana, as well as the teachings of all the Buddhist schools. The Bodhisattva doesn't belong to this school as opposed to that school. He doesn't even belong to the Mahayana as opposed to some other *yāna*. He studies and masters the *dharmas* of all *yānas*, all schools, all sects, and all traditions. Not only that, but the Bodhisattva, we are told, should master even the non-Buddhist religious

and philosophical systems. Some scriptures go so far as to say that the Bodhisattva should study secular arts and sciences, especially rhetoric and prosody (which were very much in favour during the Indian Middle Ages). We're told that he should study these subjects because this will increase his power of communication: he'll be able to put across his message more effectively if he has these arts and sciences at his fingertips. A few of the sutras even say that the Bodhisattva should master various trades, such as that of the potter. Then, knowing the vocabulary and outlook of these trades, he will have a fresh range of reference, with the help of which he will be able to get the teachings across to more and more people. In other words, he'll be able to 'speak their language'. Knowing the sort of language — both literal and metaphorical — which they normally use, he will be able to communicate his attitudes, ideals, and aspirations more effectively. This, then, is the Bodhisattva's third Great Vow: to master all *dharmas*; to master the teachings of Buddhism, the teachings of non-Buddhist schools, and even all the humanistic subjects.

4. May I lead all beings to Buddhahood

This, of course, is the ultimate aim. This the Bodhisattva does by teaching, by example, and also by silent communication of his influence.

Such are the 'Four Great Vows': (1) May I deliver all beings from difficulties; (2) May I eradicate all defilements; (3) May I master all *dharmas*; (4) May I lead all beings to Buddhahood.

Perhaps now we are in a position to understand something at least of the implications of these 'Four Great Vows', which are recited daily in all centres of Mahayana Buddhism. Together they constitute the heart of the Mahayana, the heart even of Buddhism itself. Together they constitute the Bodhisattva Vow — the concrete, practical expression of the Bodhicitta in terms of the life and the work of the individual Bodhisattva and the foundation of his whole subsequent career.

Seminar Extracts

1 A Vow or Just a Change of Diet?

from 'Rechungpa's Repentance' (*The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*) Men's Seminar, Padmaloka, November 1980

He was delighted beyond all measure. He confirmed and imprinted on his mind a faith that Milarepa was Buddha Himself. He thought, "so far, I have served the Jetsun in many ways. Hereafter, I will serve him even 'better than before.'" This vow he kept, and lived up to it all his life.

The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa, trans. Garma C. C. Chang, Shambhala, Boulder & London 1977, Vol. II, p. 453

Sangharakshita: This brings up the question of vows. Rechungpa made a vow, and we are told he kept it. '*lived up to it all his life.*' That isn't an easy thing to do, is it? What do we mean by a vow? What do we understand by this word vow? I think there is still quite a bit of, I won't say confusion, but unclarity, in people's minds about vows.

Jayadeva: Does this refer to what you were saying about promises? We sort of think that the important thing is the taking of the vow, whereas the important thing is keeping it. So, in a sense, you haven't really taken a vow if you haven't kept it for the period that you said you were going to keep it. Unless you act upon it you haven't really taken a vow.

S.: Well, you could say that, but that might be regarded as a bit sophistical — that if you break it you haven't really taken it; that you cannot in fact break a vow.

Jayadeva: Well, just in the sense that they're not something that you easily take.

S.: It's certainly not something that you easily take. But what does the taking of a vow really presuppose in you?

A Voice: That you're integrated enough to ...

S.: Yes, it presupposes quite a high degree of integration. The presupposition is that you are able to be completely single-minded: that there is no factor within yourself that you haven't taken into consideration, that is going to intervene and cause you to break the vow.

Abhaya: But isn't there an element of uncertainty in one when one makes the vow? Because, in a sense, you make the vow because there is a certain weakness which you have to overcome, so...

S.: Yes, but not necessarily. It can be a purely positive vow, like a Bodhisattva vow. You may make a vow to perform a certain good action without there necessarily being a weakness that it is specifically intended to counteract.

Abhaya: But in the case of that sort of vow where there is a weakness, there is a lack of integration, and you make your vow, in a sense, to become more integrated and therefore to overcome that weakness.

S.: But that would suggest that, in order to make and keep the vow, there still needs to be a very high degree of integration — well over 50%, so to speak. Otherwise you simply will not be able to keep the vow, because it would be very difficult to keep it by sheer force of will. A simple vow is not by itself the means of overcoming a serious weakness in which a great part of your personality and of your energy is involved.

One of the vows that people have often taken is the vow of celibacy or of chastity. So if you're conscious that, for instance, you have a serious weakness in this particular area, and that your sexual passions are unusually strong, you would be very ill-advised to try to deal with the matter by taking a vow. You need a whole regimen and way of life to help you to bring that aspect of yourself under control. If you make a vow to be celibate, say, for a year, and if those passions were about 60% of you, after a few weeks or months you'd be really struggling hard, you'd have a terrible conflict on your hands and you probably would lose. Or even if you won it would be just a sort of technical victory which wouldn't do you much good. Hence a vow of celibacy would not be the means of dealing with that situation, even if you really had made up your mind to deal with it. You would need the support much more of circumstances which were conducive to the non-arousal of sexual passions: maybe particular types of meditation, even a particular diet. But just a vow would not be a means of dealing with that situation.

Guhyananda: A vow might have a spiritual element in it where a resolution wouldn't have. You might resolve to do something and ...

S.: Well, a vow is usually more solemn because you as it were call the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to witness. You call, perhaps, fellow members of the spiritual community to witness your vow. This is all a means of bolstering it up, because you would not like to let them down, you would not like to disappoint them, and so on.

Simon Chinnery: So what is the real place of a vow? What are the right circumstances for making a vow?

S.: In the first place, a reasonably high degree of integration. A vow is not a substitute for other spiritual measures. Also, it should relate to something very specific and concrete. For instance, you make a vow to do the Metta Bhavana meditation for one hour every day, absolutely without fail, for a year.

That is a suitable vow, something specific, and [by making it you] really tie yourself down. Somebody told me that he had made a vow to do the Mindfulness of Breathing for half an hour a day. I said, "That's too vague. What do you mean by a day? Do you mean one period of twenty-four hours? Or do you mean the hours during which it is light on a certain calendar day? Have it absolutely clear in your own mind!"

Abhaya: Did his jaw drop?

S.: It did a bit! But he saw the point. He saw it would help if he had that very clear in his own mind. Otherwise the mind will start finding little loopholes. From twelve o'clock midnight to twelve o'clock midnight constitutes a day, and within that day, you must do half an hour of Mindfulness of Breathing — is that what you mean? Be very clear about it. Otherwise you may find that you have in a sense kept your vow, but that a thirty-six hour period has gone by without your actually doing the Mindfulness of Breathing practice.

Thus a vow must be very specific. You must be very clear what you are actually pledging yourself to observe. Moreover, a vow should certainly stretch you quite a bit. At the same time, it shouldn't be something which, given your particular temperament and spiritual capacities, [it] is a bit hazardous [for you to undertake], or something that your [spiritual] friends might doubt that you could really carry out. A vow is that to which you must be able really to commit yourself, with the whole force of your being, and with the conviction that you are absolutely going to do what you have undertaken to do. There must not be any kind of doubt or hesitation — which again suggests that you know yourself really quite well. A vow must not be a foolhardy sort of thing, based on inadequate knowledge of yourself. It mustn't be a mere wish. It must be a real determination, a real resolution, a real conviction, a real commitment.

Simon Chinnery: But if it's a real determination with the force of your whole being behind it, why is a vow actually necessary? You know if you're really going to do it ...

S.: Well, it gives you an additional reinforcement by calling upon Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and members of the spiritual community to witness. But if, of course, there's no difficulty at all and you're going to do it anyway, you don't even think about a vow or even a resolution. It's just something that you do.

A Voice: You might want to do it just to experiment. Supposing you want to renounce something, to see what the implications were, and what's going on in the situation.

S.: That would be quite valid, provided you had sufficient strength of mind and were sufficiently integrated to be able to carry out the experiment.

Devaraja: Would it be better — I mean I found it was easier to be celibate for a time without a vow, in actual fact. It's almost as though I approached it experimentally and I said, "Well, let's give it another day." In a way it felt more — there's more tension that way, you know.

S.: Well, with regard to any activity, if there is a fixed terminal point there is a tendency to look forward to that point. Do you see what I mean? Even with regard to something positive like a study retreat, if you know that it is going to end on a certain day or at a certain time there is a tendency to start counting the days. And that does interfere slightly with your spontaneity. In the case you mentioned, it could also have something to do with some people's (tendency) not to feel very happy being tied down or under an obligation, or obliged to do something, or compelled to do something, even though it's they themselves that are doing the obliging and compelling, so to speak. You feel more free extending from day to day, as though it's still within your own control. The original vow was within your own control but if you made it, say, six months ago, it doesn't *feel* like your decision. Even though you know it was your decision your experience is that it is something imposed upon you. It's the past self-imposing it on the present self. Whereas, if the present self can decide afresh each day, it seems as though it's more within your control — as though you're more free and doing what you want to do. It has all those implications.



2 An Extra Reminder

from Questions and Answers on The Bodhisattva Ideal, Pre-Ordination Retreat, Tuscany 1984

Vessantara: Have you ever thought of having those four [Bodhisattva] vows as part of the FWBO?

Sangharakshita: Even though the arising of the Bodhicitta is, in a sense, synonymous with Stream-Entry and that is, again, synonymous with Going for Refuge; even though, yes, we *do* recite the refuges, nonetheless the arising of the Bodhicitta in the Mahayana has a sort of aura of associations. It has a quite distinctive flavour, as it were, of the Transcendental, and I feel it shouldn't be taken lightly, because the wording [of the vows] is rather extreme.

For instance, supposing you say, "I vow to save all beings". 'All beings' means 'all beings', and one shouldn't repeat those words lightly. Even though the words do correspond to the act of Going for Refuge, the tremendous implications of which are no less, one might say, than those of the arising of the Bodhicitta;

nevertheless the implications of [the Going .for Refuge] are not made so explicit. You can sincerely and honestly say, "Yes, I go for refuge". But can you actually say with equal sincerity, "I vow to deliver all beings"? Can that be for you an equally real statement? So therefore I'm rather reluctant that we should include in a Puja statements of that sort, which people recite but not, presumably, in the way they should be recited.

I think this is an instance of the Mahayana's 'way-out-ness', which has certainly got its own meaning and value: it reveals and makes explicit a cosmic perspective which is, as it were, actually there. But such formulations of cosmic perspective do not seem to lend themselves to casual recitation, or even very serious recitation, in the ordinary sense. So therefore I've not encouraged the recitation of those [Bodhisattva] vows in that sort of way. In any case, we do have the Transference of Merits at the end of the 'Sevenfold Puja'. [Of course], one or two people do actually recite these four vows in the course of their own private devotions, and I've nothing to say against that, because if you do it as an individual, private practice; presumably you are in fact taking it very seriously and it does really mean something to you. But just to have everybody who happens to be present [at a Puja] reciting a vow to deliver all beings (to go no further than *that!*), would seem to make it impossible for people to take those words seriously.

Greg Shanks: I've heard it said that in the early days of the Movement you gave a Bodhisattva ordination [in the course of which] the vows were taken, and that this was an experiment that failed. Do you see the possibility of it being relevant [to us now]?

S.: Yes, this is quite right, I myself described it as an experiment that failed. At that time I added [to our 'Ten Precepts'] four extra precepts, which were more of a Bodhisattva character; but they certainly weren't the 'Four Great Vows'. What I felt at that time was that the position of *Chairman* needed to be given some sort of spiritual significance, and I thought a possible way of doing that was to give the person who took on that sort of responsibility these four extra precepts. Though it didn't actually work, I have thought since that there might be something to be said for sometimes including in the Puja, not Bodhisattva vows, but Bodhisattva precepts. Not in the sense of actually having any additional precepts, but of reminding oneself in a general way of the Bodhisattva Ideal, of that particular aspect of the spiritual life. Reminding oneself of the different ways in which the spiritual life can be practised, and the different aspects which it can unfold.

For instance, one of the Bodhisattva precepts is refraining from praising oneself and blaming others. This is something quite down-to-earth and practical and useful, so there's no reason why *that* particular precept, and others like it, shouldn't sometimes be recited as a sort of extra reminder, without being formally taken by individuals or officially added on to the list of precepts.



3 Something To Stick To

from Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism

Mixed Order Retreat, Abhirati, August 1974

Sangharakshita: Perhaps there's not really much to be said about the *praṇidhānas*. One obviously takes the spirit of them rather than the letter. There are all sorts of alternative sets [of vows] in Buddhist literature and Bodhisattvas are represented as making all sorts of vows. Probably the most famous set is that of the

'Four Great Vows': to deliver all beings from difficulties; to learn all dharmas; to abandon all passions and to lead all beings to Enlightenment. These four probably summarize all of them. Mr. Chen used to say that every aspiring Mahayana Buddhist ought to make his own vows, and [Mr. Chen] had various sets of vows that he'd made at various times. In Mahayana circles you often find devout Buddhists making certain vows covering their whole life. For instance, someone might make a vow to publish or have printed the whole Tripiṭaka¹¹ at his own expense, and distribute it free. This would be a vow. He'd say, "I'm going to do this", and would then spend his whole life doing it. Someone else would say, "I will construct one hundred stupas in the course of the rest of my life", or, "I shall arrange for such and such a great master to deliver a series of lectures on such and such a sutra". These are all vows. Many vows used to take this particular kind of form [as a means to] strengthen oneself and give oneself a bit of spiritual backbone. [A vow is] something to stick to instead of losing oneself in a sort of mish-mash of vague quasi-spiritual aspirations. For instance, I did mention to several people concerned with organizational things to make up their minds to stick to their present jobs for a couple of years. It's almost as though I was asking them to take a vow [to do this].

4 Can We Take it Literally?

from Questions and Answers on The Bodhisattva Ideal, Pre-Ordination Retreat, Tuscany 1984

Antonio Perez: [One of the Bodhisattva vows] is 'to see all the incidents of the earthly career of a Buddha'. How can one actually vow to do that?

Sangharakshita: Well, one mustn't forget that the traditional Mahayana presentation of the career [of the] Bodhisattva envisages it extending over three *asamkhyeya-kalpas*,¹² and therefore covering innumerable lifetimes. And during those lifetimes you'll be born during the lifetime of quite a number of different Buddhas, and in contact with them in some way or other, even perhaps as their disciple. So in the course of all those lifetimes, which you as it were share with different Buddhas, you'll have the opportunity of seeing all the events in the life of a Buddha from the very beginning.

For instance, you may be a god watching from heaven when the Buddha is born. You may perhaps be the Buddha's charioteer, or one of his concubines. Or you may be one of the five disciples [who were his first Enlightened disciples]. So you make a vow that you will see the whole of a Buddha's life, be a witness to the whole series of the events, especially the outstanding events, in the life of a Buddha. (According to general Buddhist teaching, the life of every Buddha follows a standard pattern. His mother always dies seven days after his birth; he always has two chief disciples; he always gains Enlightenment seated under a certain tree, and so on.) That is what this vow means. Whether we take it literally or [metaphorically] or in some other way is an entirely different matter.

Antonio Perez: Can it be relevant to us?

S.: This of course assumes that [the vow] isn't relevant in that form. (*Laughter.*) Perhaps it is, perhaps not. You could look at it as acquainting oneself with the life of the Buddha through literature. You might also take it quite literally and ask: Why does the Bodhisattva take the vow anyway? He wants to see not just this incident, or that episode, but the whole story from beginning to end, in order to inspire himself. Of course, it must be more inspiring to actually see those episodes for real, so to speak, than to read about them. But even to read about them can be very inspiring, too.

This is quite a common, even popular, Bodhisattva vow, to accompany a Buddha throughout all the different stages of his career. It may be that these different ways of putting things are not very relevant to us now, or a bit incomprehensible. But I think we ought to make an effort to grasp what they mean and what they involve, at least imaginatively, and not be in too much of a hurry to make them relevant to our present condition; almost in a rationalistic sort of way. We must allow ourselves to linger over them a bit and at least contemplate the possibility of taking them seriously. I think we must grasp them imaginatively first before deciding whether to take them literally or not.



5 A Bodhisattva's Willing

from *The Sutra of Golden Light*

Community Seminar, Sukhavati, December 1976

I will worship the Buddhas in the ten directions in the world. I will deliver the beings in the ten directions from all woe. I will establish in the tenth stage all the inconceivably many beings. And when I have placed them in the tenth stage, may they become Tathāgatas. May I follow my career for millions of aeons for the sake of every single being until I am able to deliver every one from the ocean of woe. May I expound to those beings this profound Confession. The excellent Suvarṇabhāsa by name causes the destruction of all acts. By proclaiming it once, all the cruel evil one has done in thousands of aeons proceeds to destruction. I will expound this Confession, the splendid, excellent Suvarṇabhāsa, by which is quickly obtained the destruction of acts (and) hindrances. I will place in the tenth stage choice mines of the ten jewels. I will make shine the Buddha-qualities. I will cross over from the ocean of existence. And I will fill the flood of the Buddha-sea, the deep ocean of virtues, omniscience, with inconceivable Buddha-qualities. May I become an excellent Buddha with hundreds of thousands of meditations, with inconceivable magic formulas, with the senses, with the (ten) powers (and) the (seven) members of enlightenment.

The Sutra of Golden Light, trans. R. E. Emmerick, Luzac & Company, London 1970,
pp. 11-12

Sangharakshita: So what this paragraph really represents is the vows of the Bodhisattva. First of all, '*I will worship the Buddhas in the ten directions in the world.*' This is meant to be one of the chief duties of the Bodhisattva — to worship the Buddha. And then, '*I will deliver the beings in the ten directions from all woe.*' In a way this is the essence of the Bodhisattva Vow. '*I will establish in the tenth stage all the inconceivably many beings.*' What is this tenth stage?

A Voice: The tenth *bhūmi*.

S.: Yes, it's the tenth *bhūmi*, the tenth stage of the Bodhisattva's career, in which he attains full Enlightenment. So to say this means that one will lead '*all the inconceivably many beings*' in the direction of complete Enlightenment. '*And when I have placed them in the tenth stage may they become Tathāgatas.*' How could this be misunderstood?

Vimalamitra: He can't place you.

S.: The Bodhisattva can't place you really. You're not a sack of potatoes to be lifted up and placed in the tenth *bhūmi* by the Bodhisattva. So what do you think it means? Why is it put in this way?

A Voice: It's through your influence or guidance ...

S.: Yes, but why doesn't the text say that? Why does it say '*I will place all beings in the tenth bhūmi*' when literally that is quite impossible? It's as though the beings are purely passive and the Bodhisattva is totally active in the situation, that he does it for them. It seems quite un-Buddhistic.

Vimalamitra: Does it indicate the strength of determination of the Bodhisattva?

S.: Yes, it's much more like that. The emphasis is entirely on what you as a Bodhisattva should do. So, if anything, it's all exaggerated, it's all being looked at from the standpoint of you as the Bodhisattva, not you as an object of the Bodhisattva's solicitude. All the emphasis is on what the Bodhisattva does, on his energy, his heroism, his skilful means. This is why it is put in this extreme sort of way.

You must be *willing* to do everything for everybody, even though actually you can't literally take anyone and put them in the first *bhūmi*, let alone the tenth. You can't drag beings out of the Samsara by their hair. Even the Buddha can't do that.

Graham Stephen: It's quite a change from the Christian point of view, isn't it?

S.: I suppose it is. Any sort of spiritual act — to have any meaning — must be done by you of your own free will. You can't be coerced into doing it and it can't be done for you by anybody else. If even the weakest and most miserable human being wants to stay where he is, not all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the universe can do anything about it. They can only try to persuade and convince you; they can't make you gain Enlightenment — and they don't attempt to.

Graham Stephen: What about the story of the Buddha and Nanda?¹³

S.: Skilful means. (*Laughter.*) You can forcibly make someone a monk, but you can't forcibly make him gain Nirvana. The Buddha forcibly made Nanda a monk, but he didn't gain Nirvana until he himself started thinking and feeling and experiencing something. The Buddha certainly helped, but he didn't do it all for him.

A Voice: It sounds like a bit of a gamble.

S.: Maybe it was, but it paid off. The Buddha took him away from his wife; so what was the worst that could happen? Well, that he'd go back to her. The situation wouldn't have been any worse than it was to begin with. But anyway it did work in that case.

So one must remember that in many of these Mahayana scriptures the emphasis is very one-sided. It's exhorting the Bodhisattva to do this and do that and it rather loses sight of the other side of the question. "*I will rescue all those beings; I will take them to Enlightenment.*" That should be your attitude — but you can't literally do it. You can only advise, you can only help, you can only guide. You can't pick people up by the scruff of their necks and take them there even though you are a Bodhisattva. Even the wicked have their rights.

'May I follow my career for millions of aeons for the sake of every single being' What is this 'career'? The word translated is '*caryā*'; it means 'course' or 'faring' or even 'life'. It's the Bodhisattva course, the Bodhisattva life, and according to tradition it's the life that continues life after life, even, as the text says here, '*for millions of aeons*'. In other words, the Bodhisattva becomes a sort of impersonal cosmic force which operates from age to age.

'The excellent Suvarṇabhāsa by name causes the destruction of all acts.' What do you think is meant by '*the destruction of all acts*'? When are all acts destroyed?

Vimalamitra: When karma* is transcended.

S.: Yes, which means when one gains Enlightenment. So, *'By proclaiming it once,'* -- that is by proclaiming the *Suvarṇabhāsa* — *'all the cruel evil one has done in thousands of aeons proceeds to destruction.'* Notice this expression: *'the cruel evil'*. that's the worst kind of evil ...

'I will expound this Confession, the splendid, excellent Suvarṇabhāsa,' — sometimes this means the whole sutra, sometimes just the Confession, sometimes the Golden Light — *'by which is quickly obtained the destruction of acts and hindrances. I will place in the tenth stage choice mines of the ten jewels.'* Presumably these are all sorts of noble spiritual qualities.

'I will make shine the Buddha qualities,' — in oneself presumably. *'I will cross over the ocean of existence.'* This is a very familiar sort of idiom — cross over to the other shore, the shore of Nirvana. *'May I become an excellent Buddha with hundreds of thousands of meditations, with inconceivable magic formulas, with the senses,'* -- that's *'Indriyas'*. I don't think it means 'senses' here; I think it means the 'Five Spiritual Faculties',¹⁴ because immediately afterwards it mentions *'the ten powers and the seven members'*¹⁵ of enlightenment.'

So this Bodhisattva vow comes after the first confession. Do you think there's any sort of reason behind this sequence?

Vimalamitra: After the confession you're free to take the vow.

S.: Yes, you've cleared the ground, not to say cleared the decks, for action. You've disencumbered yourself of the past. You're free to make a new start.



6 Saving Mind Beings

from 'The Sutra Spoken by the Sixth Patriarch' (*A Buddhist Bible*), Mixed Seminar, Abhirati, March 1974

Learned Audience: Having repented of our sins, we should take the following all-embracing vows: Listen very carefully:-

Our Mind-essence is potentially an infinite number of sentient beings. We vow to bring them all unto deliverance.

We vow to get rid of the evil passions of our minds, inexhaustible though they seem.

We vow to learn the countless systems of Dharma in our Mind-essence.

We vow to attain the Supreme Buddhahood of our Mind-essence.

A Buddhist Bible, ed. Dwight Goddard, Beacon Press, Boston 1970, p. 509

Sangharakshita: It seems at this point Hui-Neng is introducing the audience to the Bodhisattva Ideal. He's already spoken about repentance as the first step and now he's speaking about the development of the Bodhisattva attitude, even the Bodhicitta, as expressed in these 'Four Great Vows' of the Bodhisattva. Usually these are translated as the vow 'to deliver all beings from difficulties', the vow 'to get rid of all

mental defilements', the vow 'to learn all the *dharmas*' — in the sense of different interpretations and presentations of the teaching — and the vow 'to gain Enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.'

But here Hui-Neng adds something of his own which is brought out in the sentence, '*Our Mind-essence is potentially an infinite number of sentient beings.*' The more literal translation which we get elsewhere reads: '*We vow to bring to deliverance all the sentient beings of our own mind.*' This is Hui-Neng's distinctive contribution and it reflects the *Laṅkāvatāra*-type teaching that you mustn't think that the individual beings, the *dharmas*, are something separate from your mind. Here, of course, is meant not the individual mind, but the One Mind — which is ultimately your mind. But it's not 'your' mind in the sense that you, individually, possess it; it's the Ultimate Truth of your mind, of you, which you can get down to by piercing through all the different layers and levels of your own mind until you come out beyond your own mind on the other side and find the One Mind. That One Mind is equally the mind of all sentient beings, so you're really taking the vow to deliver all the sentient beings of your own mind, your own One Mind, or True Mind.

Hui-Neng presents all the vows against this sort of *Laṅkāvatāra*-type background. In other words he makes it clear it's not something individualistic in the ordinary sense, and we may say that by means of these vows (*praṇidhānas*) Hui-Neng introduces the audience to the Mahayana attitude.

We have now vowed to deliver an infinite number of sentient beings; but what does that mean? It does not mean that I, Hui-Neng is going to deliver them. And who are these sentient beings, potential within our minds? They are the delusive mind, the deceitful mind, the evil mind, and such like — all these are sentient beings. Each of them has to be delivered by one-self by means of his own Essence of Mind; only by his own deliverance, is it genuine.

Ibid., p. 510

S.: This is not very easy to understand. '*It does not mean that I, Hui-Neng is going to deliver them.*' He seems to mean that, if you speak in terms of Hui-Neng at all, it's rather that Hui-Neng is going to allow the light of the One Mind to break through his own individual mind; it's that light of the One Mind, which is not 'his' but which manifests through him, which is going to effect the work of deliverance.

It's just like the Bodhicitta. When you take the Bodhisattva Vow you don't think that "*I'm going to deliver everybody, I'm going to save everybody.*" But you practise in such a way, you develop such an attitude that, within the depths of your individual mind, the Bodhicitta can arise, the Bodhicitta can emerge. And it's that Bodhicitta, working as it were through you, that is going to lead others to Enlightenment. It's that cosmic Will to Enlightenment manifesting through the individual that effects the Bodhisattva's task.

One can take this passage in two ways: metaphysically and psychologically. Metaphysically, one can again take it in the light of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* — the One Mind is ultimately my mind, because I can break through 'my' mind into that One Mind and realize it. And so can all other living beings; we are all beings of that one True Mind. So all the sentient beings that have to be delivered are sentient beings of that one True Mind, which is my mind. So 'I', as identified with that one True Mind, am essentially only trying to deliver, am only trying to purify, the beings of and within my own mind. They're all manifestations of that One Mind, as I am. So in me trying to save them, it's the One Mind that's trying to purify itself. This is how 'I' should feel.

Psychologically, it's even more interesting. Why? '*They are the delusive mind, the deceitful mind, the evil mind, and such like — all these are sentient beings.*' This relates to something more elementary, something more simple to understand; and it's something very important indeed. It's the fact that we are not integrated. Our energies are not integrated. We are not a self; we're a collection of selves, pulling in different directions. So almost the first thing that we have to do is to unify our different selves, unify our energies. And this is one aspect of concentration and meditation: it's a process of progressive self-unification. That's why you feel more energy [after you've been practising meditation for a while] — because all your energies have come together. They're not fighting against one another; they're all working together. They're one stream of energy. So you feel much better, much more yourself; you're integrated.

Until then it's like being split into a number of warring selves. Every now and then *this* self is victorious; every now and then *that* self is victorious. This is why you can't work away at something over a long period. Sometimes the decision to work is taken by one particular self; but after a few days that self is deposed and another self is ruling, and *it's* trying to get on with *its* thing. You haven't got one unified self which is carrying the whole thing forward all the time. So that's why you get all these ups and downs. This passage seems to refer to that.

Our particular mental states can even function sort of autonomously. (This relates to the idea of possession.) Every now and then one of our autonomous complexes comes up from our unconscious and takes over. And 'we' — in other words, all the other selves — are helpless. Temporarily that one is strongest, is uppermost, and there's nothing we can do about it. So what Hui-Neng is saying is that, to deliver all these sentient beings of our own mind — our own mutual mind — we must destroy their autonomy. We must unify them and integrate them in the light of a higher spiritual principle. It isn't a question of one becoming stronger and keeping all the others down; it's a question of invoking some higher aspect of oneself, one's 'own essence of Mind', one's own True Mind, and bringing them all together in the light of that. That is what is really required.



7 When There's No Need for a Vow

from 'The Diamond Sutra' (*Buddhist Wisdom Books*), Pre-Ordination Retreat, Tuscany 1982

The Lord said: Here, Subhuti, someone who has set out in the vehicle of a Bodhisattva should produce a thought in this manner: 'As many beings as there are in the universe of beings, comprehended under the term "beings" — egg-born, born from a womb, moisture-born, or miraculously born; with or without form; with perception, without perception, and with neither perception nor non-perception, — as far as any conceivable form of beings is conceived: all these I must lead to Nirvana, into that Realm of Nirvana which leaves nothing behind. And yet, although innumerable beings have thus been led to Nirvana, no being at all has been led to Nirvana.' And why? If in a Bodhisattva the notion of a 'being' should take place, he could not be called a 'Bodhi-being'. 'And why? He is not to be called a Bodhi-being, in whom the notion of a self or of a being should take place, or the notion of a living soul or of a person.'

Buddhist Wisdom Books, trans. Edward Conze, Allen & Unwin, London 1958, p. 25

Subhuti: What exactly is meant here by 'notion of a being'?

Sangharakshita: Well, as a result of one's experience, one's encounters with so-called 'beings', one forms the notion, or concept, of an objectively existing, unchanging, identifiable, separate self or being or soul or person. But this notion is a wrong notion, inasmuch as it doesn't correspond to the facts of the situation. Whether in terms of '*dharmas*' — according to the Hinayana — or in terms of '*śūnyatā*' — according to the Mahayana — the notion of a being is simply your wrong interpretation of the facts of your own experience. You construe them in a particular wrong way.

Vessantara: If a Bodhisattva didn't have a notion of beings, how would he actually go about leading them to Nirvana?

S.: Well, he doesn't. One might say that that is what he appears to do, from the point of view of other people, but he himself doesn't see it in that way. For instance, to give an illustration on a much more ordinary level, somebody might see another person being generally helpful, useful, thoughtful, doing things for other people, and they might think that they've got a definite, clear-cut notion in their minds of being helpful and doing things for other people. But, as far as the actual person who's doing all these things is concerned, they don't have any such notion at all. It's just their nature to do these things and they just do them spontaneously.

So, on another level entirely — even on a quite different level — the Bodhisattva acts freely and spontaneously. It's not that he has a definite notion of other people and a definite notion of helping them; it's just his nature to act in that particular way. Do you see what I'm getting at? Perhaps this can give one some feeble intimation of it. The Bodhisattva is free of self-consciousness in the less positive sense of the term.

Shantiprabha: So the Vow sinks into the very depths of his being. Everything comes from the Vow.

S.: Yes, it's a spontaneous expression of it. He's just living his life. He's just doing what is natural for him to do, doing what he likes to do, doing what he wants to do. From his point of view there is nothing special about it.

Vessantara: So, in a way, when he's on that level there's no need of a vow.

S.: In a sense there's no need for a vow — not in the sense in which people who have not taken the Vow understand the Vow.

Vessantara: Could you see the Vow as just being a starting point?

S.: Well, it is certainly a starting point, though it is a starting point that continues throughout the Bodhisattva's whole career. It's not something he leaves behind in the way that a literal starting point is left behind. It's a thread that runs through the whole of the career, through all the different stages.

Vessantara: But is that starting point what actually defines a Bodhisattva?

S.: No, it's the arising of the Bodhicitta which defines a Bodhisattva — and then the Bodhicitta finds expression in the taking of the Vow and in the practice of the 'Six *Pāramitās*'. I've explained all this in *The Three Jewels*.¹⁶ There's *prañidhicitta*, being represented by the Vow, and there's *prastānacitta*, being represented by the practice of the 'Six *Pāramitās*'.

Vessantara: Does that mean his vow is spontaneous? He doesn't decide to vow, he just ...

S.: This brings up questions like: When does insight become Insight? Although inasmuch as he starts off as a non-Bodhisattva he presumably has to think quite consciously and deliberately about taking the Vow, that's not to say that the actual taking of it is deliberate in that sort of way. You might say that his thinking about taking it prepares the ground for its actual spontaneous arising.

Vessantara: The Vow would be the natural expression of the arising of the Bodhicitta?

S.: Yes, along with the determination to practise the 'Six *Pāramitās*'. But it becomes increasingly difficult to think of the arising of the Bodhicitta and the taking of the Vow as individual acts in the ordinary sense. If you take the expression 'all beings' literally — beings of the past, present, and future, beings of the whole universe, of all kinds, on all levels — that's an awful lot of beings! And if you take a vow to lead them all to

Nirvana — well, you're taking on a tremendous responsibility. So I wonder whether it can really be regarded as an individual act or individual responsibility.

In any case, if there are lots of Bodhisattvas all engaged in the same task, how can they be regarded as separate? How can it be possible for any one individual Bodhisattva to fulfil his vow to lead all beings to Nirvana unless all the other Bodhisattvas stand aside; unless they stop being Bodhisattvas? Do you see what I mean? Otherwise each Bodhisattva would get in the way of all the others!

So it does seem that the notion of a single Bodhisattva taking on this whole responsibility on his own shoulders is — logically at least — self-contradictory.

Vessantara: Isn't that taking it a bit literally?

S.: Why should you not take it literally? It is expressed in those terms. A vow is a very serious matter; to interpret it metaphorically is almost like explaining it away.

Vessantara: Is it like the private ordination: you're prepared if need be to go it alone, then you discover that there are other beings who've also committed themselves and you therefore work with them.

S.: No. A Bodhisattva is on a much higher level — presumably — than an ordinary dharmachari. I think one can't actually take the Bodhisattva Vow too literally. It's as though the Bodhisattva sees or imagines the totality of beings as in need of Enlightenment. He sees quite clearly that this is the best thing for them, for everybody: that they should all gain Enlightenment. He sees it so clearly that he cannot but identify himself with it — to such an extent that he devotes all his energies to helping to actualize it. So it's not literally that he himself as an individual person takes the responsibility for that; he identifies himself with the fulfilment of that need — as do others.

Vessantara: I don't quite see the distinction between identifying with the need and taking responsibility.

S.: Well, he doesn't take a personal sort of responsibility in the sense of thinking that *he* will do it. He throws himself wholeheartedly into the task; he forgets himself. It's as though you see some terrible accident; you see a lot of people injured and needing help. You don't stop and think: "I'll help them"; you just throw yourself in and do whatever you can. You identify yourself with their needs. You devote yourself to it so wholeheartedly that you've no energy left over to think in terms of 'you' being the one who is doing it.

Vessantara: Presumably it's a vow that just can't be broken — because it comes from the Bodhicitta.

S.: It is quite clearly represented as an expression of the Bodhicitta. But then the Bodhicitta itself is not indestructible. The Bodhisattva only becomes irreversible from the eighth *bhūmi*. That means that he cannot then give up being a Bodhisattva; so he cannot give up the Bodhicitta; and presumably he cannot give up the Bodhisattva Vow.

So according to tradition the Vow becomes unbreakable only from the eighth *bhūmi* onwards when the Bodhisattva becomes irreversible from the goal of full Enlightenment for the sake of all. The Vow from the first *bhūmi* cannot be broken without giving up the Bodhicitta itself; so long as the Bodhicitta is there, the Vow cannot be broken. In a sense, it's a natural expression of the Bodhicitta.

In that case one might raise the question: what is the difference between the Bodhicitta and the Bodhisattva's Vow? It might be said that there is no difference; that the Bodhicitta can be subdivided into two aspects, one of which is the Vow and the other of which is the actual practice of the 'Six *Pāramitās*'. The one represents the Bodhisattva's consciousness of his goal and his determination to fulfil it; the other represents the steps he takes to bring it about. So it's not that there are three things: the Bodhicitta, the *prañidhāna*, and the practice of the *pāramitās*. There's just the Bodhicitta, functioning in these two different ways.

Vessantara: It seems to parallel the Path of Vision and the Path of Transformation.

S.: Yes. The Vow corresponds roughly to Vision and the practice of the *pāramitās* to Transformation.

Vessantara: So what would cause a Bodhisattva to lose his Vision?

S.: Well, there are various references in the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras. The main thing is that he just gets fed up with beings. As I said, there's an awful lot of them and they can be very tiresome. You're trying to save them and lead them to Nirvana, and they don't want to be saved, they don't want to be led to Nirvana; they put up a stiff resistance. Even though you point out to them that Nirvana is a very happy state, they just don't seem interested; they don't seem to want to attain Nirvana, for some strange reason. Apparently they feel more at home just wallowing in the miseries of the Samsara.

So it can be quite frustrating being a Bodhisattva. According to the sutras, you can get so fed up that one day you think: "Oh, away with all these beings!" And then you sink to the level of the Hinayana; the Bodhicitta collapses and you sink to the level of the Arahant Ideal.

Vessantara: I thought he didn't actually have a notion of beings.

S.: He shouldn't have. But the notion of 'self', whether with respect to oneself or to others disappears in its entirety only when Enlightenment is attained. Until then there are subtler and ever subtler notions of self. The ideal is to get rid of all notions of self.

Vessantara: So, the state when he doesn't have a notion of beings: that's when he would be irreversible?

S.: No, I wouldn't say that, because that would allow no difference between an irreversible Bodhisattva and a Buddha. One might, of course, argue that there is no such difference. But then you still have three remaining *bhūmis* to explain away. Presumably it isn't quite full Enlightenment because those three *bhūmis* are stages of progress on the Bodhisattva Path. Therefore there is some distinction between an irreversible Bodhisattva and a *Samyaksambuddha*. But it becomes more and more difficult to perceive.

Vessantara: You have said that possibly originally Stream-Entry was the point of Buddhahood, but then other stages were added in. Possibly the same thing happened with these last four *bhūmis* that separate the irreversible Bodhisattva and the Buddha?

S.: One could look at it like that. There are stages beyond, but Stream-Entry and Irreversibility represent the real turning-points. You don't really have to worry once you've entered the stream; you don't really have to worry once you've become irreversible from complete Enlightenment.



Glossary

Karma (Pali *kamma*): lit. 'action', though the term is most often used in 'Buddhist English' in its applied meaning of 'the principle governing the relationship of willed action to its experienced effect'. Action, then, here means all volitional behaviour and includes speech and even thoughts of a volitional kind. According to the principle of karma all volitional actions have consequences (*karma-vipāka*, 'the fruit of action') which will be experienced by the doer. The nature of the consequence is determined by the nature of the action. Thus actions done from skilful motivations (i.e. that are positive and healthy) give rise to consequences that are pleasant for the agent — and vice versa. It is this principle which governs the kind of experiences an individual has and his future rebirth.

Although all actions do have consequences not all experiences are the result of past actions. Karma is only one of a number of different kinds of cause-effect relationship. The Abhidharma distinguishes five levels (*niyamas*) of conditionality: the physical, biological, psychological, karmic or volitional, and Dharmic. A particular experience may be caused by the operation of forces belonging to a different order than the karmic. It is thus not easy to determine when it is karma which has brought about a particular effect.

Karmas are of different kinds and degrees: some have a stronger determining power than others and some take longer to mature into an effect. Some karmas cancel out others. It is therefore very hard to see whether a particular effect is the result of a particular action. Rather it is the whole tendency of one's behaviour made up of many actions which gives rise to the experiences one will have. An understanding of the principle of Karma is basic to Buddhist ethics and indeed underlies the spiritual life itself since it guarantees that one's genuine efforts will result in one's developing.

See Lama Govinda, *The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy*, Rider, London 1961; Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels*, Windhorse Publications, Ch. 10 and 12; Sangharakshita, 'Karma and Rebirth', available on FreeBuddhistAudio - <http://tinyurl.com/mtex6rm>

Metta Bhavana (Pali) (Skt. *Maitribhavana*): 'the development of loving-kindness'. With the Mindfulness of Breathing this is one of the two basic meditation practices taught within the FWBO. It is intended to bring about feelings of 'metta'. Metta is a term which has no precise English equivalent but which means feelings of good will and disinterested friendliness towards others which are powerfully felt and which tend to discharge themselves in beneficent action. The essence of metta is that it is impartial and universal, tending ultimately to embrace all beings equally whilst not denying the claims of personal friendship.

This feeling is gradually brought into being in the five stages of the Metta Bhavana meditation. One first of all tries to experience metta for oneself, since without self-love one cannot love others. Then one extends the feeling, stage by stage, to a friend, a neutral person, and an enemy. In the final stage one first of all sends one's feelings of metta out equally to each of the four previous subjects, to ensure that no element of partiality remains. Then one radiates one's feeling of metta out gradually from the room where one is practising to fill the entire universe. Since meditation is more of an art than a science it is not sufficient to learn a technique from a book. One should gain instruction from an experienced practitioner who can also impart something of the atmosphere and attitude of meditation. All FWBO centres have regular classes for beginners at which the Metta Bhavana and Mindfulness of Breathing will be taught and questions can be answered.

The immediate objectives of the Metta Bhavana are obvious and they may be speedily realized in improved relations with those around one. The Metta Bhavana is the practice which develops the second step, the stage of positive emotion, in '*A System of Meditation*' (available on FreeBuddhistAudio - <http://tinyurl.com/kjayxji>) outlined by the Venerable Sangharakshita. But so essential is metta to the spiritual life, and above all to the spiritual community, that its cultivation could be seen as the Path itself. In developing metta one is going beyond a narrow and rigid self-interest to an identification with others which will eventually take one beyond the distinction between self and other altogether.

See *Karaniya-mettā Sutta, Sutta-Nipāta*, I, 8; Buddhaghosa, *Viśuddhimagga*, Part II, IX; Vajirañāna Mahāthera, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice*, Buddhist Missionary Society, Kuala Lumpur 1975.

Mindfulness of Breathing: with the Metta Bhavana it is one of the two basic meditation practices taught within the FWBO. According to the *Satipaṭṭhana Sutta* of the Pali Canon, the practice was taught by the Buddha himself. It is designed to develop psychological integration, concentration, awareness, and recollectedness.

Many different forms of the Mindfulness of Breathing are known throughout the Buddhist world. As practised in the FWBO it consists of four stages, each of which requires a deeper level of concentration. The first two stages involve counting the breath, the next watching the whole volume of the breath, and the final stage concentrating on a fine point where the breath first touches the nostrils. It is not a breathing exercise and the breath is allowed to flow quite normally. It is also not an exercise in forcible fixation of the mind but the gradual process of letting the mind collect itself about the breath which acts as a focus for it. It is strongly advised that those wishing to learn to meditate would do so from an experienced teacher rather than from a book since meditating is not so much a matter of technique but of attitude. Regular introductory classes are held at all FWBO centres where full instruction will be given and where an environment has been created which is especially suited to meditation.

The benefits of the practice are quite rapidly gained and may be quite marked: greater calmness and positivity, more energy and inspiration. These psychological benefits are the consequence of increasing integration which is the primary effect of the Mindfulness of Breathing. This acts as a basis for entry into the dhyanas, the superconscious states which are the first goal of meditation. The Mindfulness of Breathing is thus primarily designed to bring about *śamathā*, the state of refinement, calmness, and integration from which *vipāśyanā* or Insight into the nature of things may arise. The practice must be seen as part of a systematic schema of personal development towards the goal of Enlightenment. According to the Venerable Sangharakshita's 'System of Meditation' (Tape Lecture no. 135, *Buddhism for Today and Tomorrow*), Dharmachakra, London 1976), the Mindfulness of Breathing is the basis for the whole system.

See Buddhaghosa, *Viśuddhimagga*, Part II, VIII, ix; Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, Rider, London 1962; Vajirañāna Mahāthera, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice*, Buddhist Missionary Society, Kuala Lumpur 1975.

Stupa (Pali *Thupa*): in pre-Buddhist India a funerary mound of kings and heroes, containing relics and ashes, similar to the barrows and burial cairns of Europe. In the Pali Canon (*Mahā-parinibbāna Suttanta*) the Buddha is reported as telling Ānanda, his personal attendant, that just as great monarchs have their remains interred in such mounds so should his own be disposed of by the lay-followers. Folding his robe into a square and then inverting his begging-bowl on top of it, he showed the form that the stupa should take. It was indeed in this shape that the earliest stupas were built. They were worshipped as reminders of the Buddha himself, since many of them contained his purported relics, and they came to be symbols of death and impermanence. The earliest shrine-rooms did not contain Buddha-images but centred upon small stupas, as at the ancient rock-cut *vihāra* at Bhaja near the FWBO retreat centre in India.

Over many centuries the original architectural form was elaborated and a rich symbolism developed. The stupa came to symbolize not just the Buddha, impermanence, and death but the entire universe and man himself, embodying the five elements of earth, water, fire, air, and consciousness. In the Tibetan stupa (Tib. *chorten*) solar and lunar symbols are included. The stupa represents the different levels in which life manifests itself and therefore the possibility of human evolution. Often architectural elements are included which further illustrate this as with the ten rings in the conical section of the Tibetan *chorten*, symbolizing fire, which represent the 'Ten *Bhūmis*' or stages in the Bodhisattva's career.

Stupas are well-known sights throughout the Buddhist world. The Great Stupa at Sanchi in India, Swayambhunath in Nepal, the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Burma, and Borobodur in Indonesia are amongst the

wonders of the world. In each new land where Buddhism has spread the stupa has taken a distinctive architectural form, reflecting the local culture.

Traditionally the stupa has served as a focus of pilgrimage, devotion, and worship by circumambulation and offering of flowers, incense, and candles. Amongst Western Buddhists the stupa is already a well-known symbol and a number of fine stupas have been built in Europe and America.

See Sangharakshita, '*Tantric Symbolism of the Stupa*', available on FreeBuddhistAudio - <http://tinyurl.com/jvukxjy> ; '*Five Element Symbolism and the Stupa*', available on FreeBuddhistAudio - <http://tinyurl.com/kf33d3v> ; Lama Govinda, '*Psychocosmic Symbolism of the Buddhist Stupa*' Dharma, Berkeley 1976.

Thang-ka: Tibetan religious banner, painted or embroidered on cloth bordered with silk and hung from a rod about which it may be rolled when not being displayed. Usually some two or three feet square for use inside a temple or in a household shrine, they may be extremely large and be hung outside the walls of monasteries and temples. *Thang-kas* are used as aids to meditation and devotion and display the rich iconography of Tibetan Buddhism: Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, great teachers, mandalas, 'Refuge Trees' etc. They may be compared to the representations of Saints and Church Fathers in mediaeval Christianity and particularly to the icons of the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

Thang-kas are usually painted by skilled craftsmen employed by a monastery or by artist-monks. Various styles developed over the centuries in the different regions of Tibet and the diverse schools and traditions of Buddhism. Chinese, Indian, Nepalese, and Mongolian artists were employed and their influences are clear in many *Thang-kas*. Some *Thang-kas* are of considerable artistic merit and manifest the inspiration of the spiritual personages they depict, although many are merely conventional illustrations of their subjects.

Thang-kas were regarded with special reverence and would not normally be on public display, particularly those depicting the Wrathful Deities. They would be kept rolled-up or would be covered by a silk curtain. Unfortunately this traditional respect is often lacking in the West where they are often treated as decorative art-objects. Poster reproductions — even of the Wrathful Deities — are available cheaply and easily and are frequently displayed in a quite inappropriate manner. Western Buddhists should take care to treat pictures and statues of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with care and respect since they represent the Ideal to which we are aspiring. *Thang-kas* should be properly framed and placed in a shrine.

Within the Western Buddhist Order a number of members have taken up the painting of *Thang-kas* following the traditional iconography. In some cases works of considerable merit have been produced which show the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the traditional postures and forms but using Western artistic techniques. These works are very much part of the process of adaptation of the Dharma to the West.

See Blanche C. Olschak and Geshé Thupten Wangyal, '*Mystic Art of Ancient Tibet*', Allen & Unwin, London 1973.



Notes

¹ The four classes of beings, a traditional classification of organisms according to the method by which they are born, are: those born from eggs, from a womb, from 'warm humidity' (it was believed that worms and insects were born in this way), and those born by apparition, appearing fully grown without conception or embryonic development (this is said to be the most numerous class of all and includes gods, hell-beings, beings in the bardo, and Non-Returners). The list is intended to exhaust all the possible kinds of living beings.

² The six states of existence are the *lokas* or realms within which rebirth takes place: the realms of hell, animal, *preta* or hungry-ghost, *aśura* or titan, human, and god. This classification is also intended to encompass all creatures.

See Subhuti, *The Buddhist Vision*, Windhorse Publications.

³ Buddha-fields (Skt. *ksetra*), a Mahayana conception, are each the domain of a particular Buddha, the world or system of worlds within which his influence is felt and over which he has spiritual responsibility. There are thus as many Buddha-fields as there are Buddhas, covering between them the entire universe. Some of these Buddha-fields are impure since they contain all the six states of existence (see note 2) amongst which are the painful worlds of hell, *asuras*, animals, and hungry-ghosts. Purifying a Buddha-field means leading its inhabitants to the two pleasurable worlds of humans and gods. The vow to purify all Buddha-fields amounts to the aspiration to help all beings throughout the universe to gain happiness.

See Sangharakshita, 'Building the Buddha Land', available on FreeBuddhistAudio - <http://tinyurl.com/o5wf5of>

⁴ The Tibetan Wheel of Life is a compound symbol which comprehensively illustrates the cyclic mode of conditionality, a life lived in repeating patterns of behaviour which have their foundation in ignorance and frustration. The 'Three Unwholesome Roots' are the underlying motivational forces which keep the Wheel turning.

See Subhuti, *The Buddhist Vision*, Windhorse Publications, 2001; Sangharakshita, 'The Symbolism of the Tibetan Wheel of Life', available on FreeBuddhistAudio - <http://tinyurl.com/l7rlkxo> ; Sangharakshita, *Creative Symbols of the Tantric Path to Enlightenment*, Windhorse Publications.

⁵ See 'Conquering the Five Hindrances', *FWBO Newsletter 58*, Summer 1983; Manjuvajra, 'The Five Hindrances', *Mitrata 23*, August 1979.

⁶ Beginners' Meditation classes are held at all FWBO centres, usually at least once a week. For more information contact The Office of the Western Buddhist Order (see back cover).

⁷ The *Śikṣā-samuccaya* is a compendium of instructions on following the Bodhisattva Path compiled by Santideva (the author of the *Bodhicaryavatara*) from Mahayana sutras many of which have now been lost. The work quoted is the *Bhagavati*.

See *Śikṣā-samuccaya* trans. Cecil Bendall and W.H.D. Rouse, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi 1971, IX, 188.

⁸ When this lecture was given, the Venerable Sangharakshita was living in London on Highgate West Hill, near Hampstead Heath.

⁹ Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), poet and philosopher, wrote mainly in Bengali but also in English.

¹⁰ See Sangharakshita, *Mind Reactive and Creative*, Windhorse Publications, also available on FreeBuddhistAudio - <http://tinyurl.com/knmcbn9>

¹¹ The Tripitaka is the collected Buddhist scriptures. Literally Tripitaka means 'Three Baskets' i.e. the three divisions of the Buddhist scriptures: the 'Sutra', 'Vinaya', and 'Abhidharma' Pitakas. There are several different collections, more or less overlapping, in Pali, Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, etc.

See Sangharakshita, *The Eternal Legacy*, Windhorse Publications.

¹² A *kalpa* is the immeasurably long period of time which it takes for a world system to evolve and decay again. Each *kalpa* is subdivided into four *asamkhyeya-kalpas*: involution, continuance of involution, evolution, and continuance of evolution. The point here is that a Bodhisattva's career is of unthinkable duration.

See Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, Windhorse Publications, Ch. I, section 4.

¹³ Nanda was the Buddha's half-brother whose wedding ceremony the Buddha attended during his first visit to his native town after his Enlightenment. The Buddha gave his bowl to Nanda and walked out of the hall with Nanda following. He then ordained him, although Nanda did not really want to become a monk, having still the image of his bride in his mind. The Buddha managed to awaken in him the desire for Enlightenment and he became an Arahant.

See *Therāgāthā* 139 and *Udāna* III ii.

¹⁴ The 'Five Spiritual Faculties' are Faith and Wisdom, Energy and Meditation, and Mindfulness. The first two pairs must be kept in balance by the exercise of Mindfulness.

See Sangharakshita, *The Pattern of Buddhist Life and Work*, available on FreeBuddhistAudio - <http://tinyurl.com/lg3uxwz>

¹⁵ The 'Ten Powers of a *Tathāgata*' concerned with the Buddha's transcendental attainments. See *Mahāsihanāda Sutta*, Majjhima Nikaya I, 12.

For the 'Seven Members of Enlightenment' (*Bodhyangas*) see Sangharakshita, *Mind Reactive and Creative*, Windhorse Publications, also available on FreeBuddhistAudio - <http://tinyurl.com/knmcbn9>

¹⁶ Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels*, Windhorse Publications.