

Imagination

'Each day is a journey, and the journey itself is home' – Basho

Introduction

These are the notes from the first week of four-week journey with the Bristol Sangha, exploring imagination through the Buddhist tradition.

A question: Do you relate to the idea of us sharing the spiritual life together as journey? If not, what image do you have for what we're doing, practising together? How do you describe it to yourself?

Over the next four weeks the plan is to focus our exploration as follows:

Week One:	The Buddha & his teachings: introducing imagination
Week Two:	Mahayana Stories & Parables: watering the roots
Week Three:	Tantric Buddhism and the Mandala: transforming energy
Week Four:	Bhante Sangharakshita, our own tradition: the role of imagination and the future of the Buddhist tradition

This week I've taken a structure from a poem by Rudyard Kipling:

*I have six honest serving men
They taught me all I knew -
Their names are What and Where and When
And Why and How and Who.*

Why does imagination matter?

Suffering

All of us start out on the journey of the spiritual life for the same reason the Buddha did: dukkha, suffering. What I love is that the Buddha was *utterly uncompromising* in his search to discover the end of suffering. He heard that ascetic practices might help – he practised them almost to the point of death before concluding 'No, that's not the way'. Prior to this, he'd *had* a life of *complete* luxury, he was said to be a prince with a palace for the hot season, a palace for the cold season, a palace for the rainy season. He knew luxury as well as asceticism. He knew from experience that indulgence wasn't the way either.

The Middle Way

The Buddha was searching for an actual *experience* of truth, of freedom, not just an *idea* of it. And in his search, he found the Middle Way, the path to freedom beyond the duality

of extremes. The extremes of indulgence and asceticism, of nihilism and eternalism, of self and other. The Middle Way is where a profound philosophical investigation can also lead. [I didn't have time to mention Nagarjuna and the teachings on the Middle Way which Simhanada can so eloquently share with polarity maps. I didn't have time to mention Kant, either, or the Yogacara school of Buddhism which could be said to explain why it is that 'the unreal imagination exists'.¹

The point that I most wanted to make is a pragmatic one: that imagination as a key to the Middle Way has been central and crucial to my spiritual life. When I first started practising I was experiencing a lot of suffering and really wanted to *know* what 'the answer' was. I have a good mind and thought that was all I needed. I did my utmost to understand the Dharma with my head. Head has a place in Dharma practice, but I was a nihilist. I loved all the teachings on sunyata, basically because I didn't want to exist. A bit like the Buddha, eventually I reached a point where I realised that I was going too far in one direction and that this wasn't going to lead me to freedom. I had to concede that my 'head' on its own wasn't going to do it, that I needed to involve more of myself, in some way, in this quest.

'More than'

The fact is that there's more to us than we like to admit. We are more than just a logical head pottering about on a pair of legs. We are powerful, with energies that we don't dare unleash. There's a famous quote that used to be attributed to Nelson Mandela, but is actually by a woman called Marianne Williamson:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our Light, not our Darkness that most frightens us.

Imagination is a key to these great energies. And the reason why imagination is vital in the spiritual life is that *if we don't use it, it will use us*. If we don't guard our imagination, it can be 'captured' when we are unaware. Consumerism plays on this. Advertising and marketing executives are paid a lot of money to capture our imagination. That's basically what happens every time we feel so certain that the new gadget, outfit or kitchen will improve our life. It's also what happens in terrorism. I didn't have time to mention this in the talk, but one could say that a terrorist is someone whose imagination is 'held captive' by an ideology which lacks the awareness and imagination to empathise with fellow human beings. It's what Hitler did. He could be said to have captured the imagination of the German people in depths of the suffering following the First World War with the 'Aryan Myth'.

In our culture, we tend to dismiss imagination as a bit of fluff – 'it's *just* imagination', 'it's *only* a dream'. I didn't have time in the talk to say, as Bhante has, that since the Reformation, when tidy protestantism replaced messy and image-filled Catholicism, imagination has had very bad press. It's like we've allowed ourselves to be conditioned to disbelieve in something which might even be described as a 'super-power', ie of the kind that superheroes have!

So why imagination matters is that if we don't *it*, it will use *us*. We talk of imagination being 'captured'. One could say that often these days, our imagination is *held hostage* to consumerism, anxiety and much more besides. We all imagine, all the time, it's just a

¹ See the section on the Yogācāra in 'A Survey of Buddhism' by Sangharakshita for more on this'.

question of whether we wake up to awareness of this fact! If we do wake up to, it's a power we can reclaim which will transform our lives in terms of creativity, skilfulness, freedom and an end to suffering.

What is imagination?

Imagination is a way in which our mind functions. Bhante Sangharakshita has said that we can think of imagination as kind of 'faculty', ie a capacity, like our sense faculties with which we see, interpret and operate in the world.

Reactive and Creative Imagination

Imagination can operate in helpful and unhelpful ways. We can describe these as 'reactive' and 'creative', following the model from Bhante's important talk on 'Mind Reactive and Creative'. The 'reactive imagination' proliferates endless negative imaginings and thoughts. It even has a technical name in the Dharma: *prapanca*. This means 'mental proliferation'. An example: we have a difficult phone-call to make, we need to tell someone something they don't want to hear and we're afraid it's all going to be very painful and involve suffering for us, as well as them. So we run the conversation in our head over and over and over again, each time imagining what we might say, what they might say, what we/they might say *next*. (Piglet does it Winnie the Pooh... "And they *he'll* say, and then *I'll* say... and then...") That's what we could call 'reactive imagination', it's often precipitated by anxiety, and under *that* by craving or aversion.

But there is also *creative* imagination. Dhīvan has explored the fact that there's no word that's usually translated as 'imagination' in the Pali Canon². He's suggested that the word 'sati', usually translated as 'awareness' does the work of our word 'imagination' in certain contexts. The fact that the Buddha didn't *have* a 'special word' which equates to our word imagination could well be because there were certain 'functionings of the mind' which he just took for granted and didn't need to name. At the time of Buddha people's imagination was alive and flourishing, they believed that the world was alive, that there was a tree spirit in every tree and that 'guardian angels' ('punya-devatas') existed. He didn't need to teach them to awaken their 'imaginal faculties' in the way that we need to. So 'creative imagination' can be understood as a kind of awareness.

In terms of the cyclic and spiral models of conditionality, we can see that reactive imagination keeps us 'on the wheel', whilst creative imagination is what comes into play in 'the gap', when we pause at the experience of suffering and are then able step up onto the spiral, into *faith* and then joy, rather than simply trundling back round through feeling, grasping etc. It is the use of imagination 'in the gap' that means we can do this.

Imagination as a 'faculty'

If we see imagination as a '*faculty*' we can begin to recognise that it's something we all have, just like we have sense faculties, even if we're not aware of it. We could see a faculty as something we can strengthen (like a muscle). It's one of our natural resources which we can cultivate, grow, feeding and nurturing it to play its true role in our lives. If we don't feed it, it may wither away like a plant that doesn't get sufficient light and water.

2 See 'Through a Blue Chasm: Coleridge, Wordsworth and the Buddha on Imagination' in the Western Buddhist Review Volume Six on thebuddhistcentre.com.

Imagination is very much connected with our 'inner life'. We may or may not be aware that we *have* an 'inner life'. If we're accustomed to living our whole life 'out there in the world', we may not realise that there's 'a world inside' as well. Meditation obviously wakes us up to this fact. But it can be long time before we begin to trust our 'inner promptings' and not just respond (react) to stimuli from *outside*. Sometimes we get glimmerings of this 'inner life'. They're often not big and dramatic. They can be easily overlooked. The experience can be like noticing a little tea-light which hasn't quite got a flame, just a bit of a glimmer on its wick. We might cup the tea-light in our hands and gently blow on it. With the right conditions, that glimmer will grow into a flame that can light our way.

'A sense of reality beyond ego clinging'

If we want to be free of suffering we need to become free of our dependence on 'saṃsāra'. This means that we need to really have confidence that we can stand on, or stand *in*, something which isn't the material world as we know it. To be free of suffering we need to be able to stand in 'reality'. You could say that reality is a 'realm' – though it's not a realm you can travel to by buying a ticket! However we think of our Dharma life, if we don't have a sense of reality *beyond* ego-clinging, then we'll remain *in* ego clinging. And that is very root of *all* our suffering. To put it another way, 'if we don't find the Buddha in our own imaginations... [our] real faith will remain in the material world'.³

A few years ago I wrote a poem that relates to this:

I believe in something bigger than god -

a no-thing something vaster than the world -
a no-thing something powered by love
yet indivisible from pain,
running on impermanence

I believe in something bigger than god.

God's OK, as far as he can go - but, poor bloke, he's rather limited...
We set him up, corporeal, imagined his wrath and then believed in it.
So what hope has *he* got of getting free of that
and of those wars we blame on him?

I believe in something bigger than god -

I rest my faith on every causal chain that sees the daisy flower,
the trees give up their bodies gracefully
mulching into the sludge-brown forest floor
out of which a newness can begin.

I believe in something bigger than god.

³ This is a quote from 'Re-imagining the Buddha' a paper in which Subhuti clarifies and augments Bhante's work on imagination on the basis of conversations with him. It can be found on www.sangharakshita.org.

I'll say again, that god's OK for certain things -
he makes a pleasant wedge to bridge across the void
if our minds have made one (void, that is) and so have need of a bridge -
better than imagining a pit and falling in. At least there's *life* in it.

But I believe in something bigger than god.

And that this 'thing' is a no-thing, I adore - sublime and yet ungraspable -
the mirror-image of this maddening world with all its anguish and its pain,
its fallow times and winter - its great fall. But a 'fall' that's like an exhale -
not a sin. Not a 'thing' that must be remedied.

A fall that's like like the breaking of a wave
that draws itself back (or rather is drawn by the moon)
dragging all that shingle in its wake
before a great exhale and white foam running up the sand.

I believe in something bigger than god

but sometimes (often) read the signals wrong.
Literalism too quick to prevail -
a quick fix we grab
because the true answer is so very long.

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How do we cultivate our imagination?

In order to harness the power of our imagination, we need to captivate it ourselves, not let it be captivated from 'outside'. We need to connect with and stir our own 'deepest energies' and heart-wishes and recognise that they have the power to transform our lives, if we let them.

The Kings and Queens of our Energies

Vessantara is a friend to many in Bristol, he gave Tārānīta his name. He writes wonderful books such as 'Meeting the Buddhas' that are full of profound imagination. Back in the early 80s he wrote an essay on 'The Bodhisattva Ideal' in a little booklet called 'Puja and the Transformation of the Heart'. In it, he says:

"... it is as if most people have only a very small proportion of their energies available to them, while the rest lie dormant. Part of the reason they lie dormant is that there is no cause to interest them. It is as if we live on the surface of life whilst in caves deep underground the kings and queens of our energies, the magicians, the dancers, the heroes and sages, remain quietly aloof, unable to raise any interest in our desire to become a junior manager, to live happily ever after with a librarian from Surbiton, or to captain the pub's darts team. Even our goals of becoming more relaxed or finding a bit of peace of mind do not excite them. But if we aspire to reach the heights, then all of a sudden, in those caverns far below, ageless heroes will start up once more at the sound of distant trumpets, and reach

for their unfailing weapons, and goddesses will weave afresh the old spells which protect the daring.”

We need to find 'our own way of seeing things'. It is our own *individual* imaginations which need to be captured, if we are to bring all of ourselves into our spiritual lives, into being part of the Sangha. Sangha is a crucial way in which we support and transform ourselves *and* the world simultaneously. The Bodhisattva Ideal, the desire to alleviate the sufferings of all beings is at the heart of the 'collective imagination' in our tradition. This combination of individual and spiritual community can be hard to grasp. It's more easily 'caught' than 'taught'. So for now, let's just say that 'individual imagination' and 'collective imagination' are both essential. And ultimately they're not different – but that's 'another story'!

So. What *really* does set you on fire? Imagination doesn't work 'second-hand'. One candle can *ignite* the flame of another, but there's no such thing as 'second-hand-light'. Some of the Buddha's final words to his disciples were 'be lamps unto yourselves'.

Being a 'warrior of the imagination'

It's important that we realize that we're not on a 'level playing field' in the world today, in terms of aspiring to cultivate individual imagination. There is much that is 'stacked against' cultivating an 'inner life'. Right back in 1960 Sangharakshita was writing about this in an essay called 'The voice within'⁴

Man is today less free to think and feel simply, naturally, and spontaneously than at any other period in history. The pitiless pressure of education and environment tends to grind down even the feeblest manifestation of independent and original thought or feeling. Our ideas and emotions are manufactured for us by those to whose advantage it is that we should think or feel as they hypocritically tell us it is good for us to think and feel. Lurid hoardings scream at us that this or that particular beverage will give us vitality and strength. Newspaper advertisements assure us with expressions of the fondest solicitude that yet another undreamed-of article is indispensable to our well-being. Political columnists tell us with an air of infallible authority which nation is right and which wrong, while popular orators inform us which ideological group we ought to love and which to hate. The propaganda machines of governments and political parties pour out an incessant stream of ready-made opinions on every possible subject, from the latest international crisis to the most recent scientific discovery. Critics of literature and art, with their 'Book of the Month' and 'Picture of the Year', save us the trouble of having to judge for ourselves which books and paintings deserve our attention and which do not. The synthetic emotion of the latest popular song renders deep and genuine feeling superfluous. Cinemas and radios, newspapers and school text-books, bill-boards and public speeches, together with a thousand other devices for the mass-production and wide dissemination of prefabricated thoughts and emotions, opinions and ideas, are doing man's thinking and feeling for him. He no longer creates, but passively receives the cartoned products of mechanical efficiency. And that which does not create does not live.

4 This can be found in his pithy book of early essays called 'Crossing the Stream'. A great read, I think they contain the 'dna' of many of his ideas.

For this reason, we need to become 'warriors of the imagination'. In the introduction to the *Gary Snyder Reader* the poet was described as 'a warrior of the imagination' at a time of 'The War Against Imagination'⁵. Jim Dodge, the author of the preface has this to say:

The nature of imagination tends toward integration, inclusion, and intimacy, and as such is inimical to the alienation and homogeneity of corporate global capitalism, centralized government, and the other forces of darkness that regard the planet as dominion rather than domicile, markets instead of hearths.

How do we become a 'warrior of the imagination'?

Sitting with the Buddha

Sitting with the Buddha is radical. It's stopping. It's not buying into anything. It's not *buying* anything. There's nowhere to go and nothing to do but sit and connect inwardly, to give space and air to our 'inner life'. To open our hearts. Imagining sitting with the Buddha can be a powerful practice. And it's one that goes back right to the very days of the Buddha. It doesn't matter how he 'appears' to us, or doesn't. We don't have to have a *visual* image of the Buddha, it's just important that we have a heart-connection in some way with the Buddha as the embodiment of our highest goal. It is a living goal that only exists in human beings, not some abstract idea.

So to conclude we're going to meet Pingiya, an old man devoted to the Buddha who lived in his lifetime.. One day, Pingiya was rejoicing to his friend Bāvāri about Gotama (the Buddha):

Up till now, before I heard Gotama's teaching, people had always told me this: "This is how it has always been, and this is how it will always be"; only the constant refrain of tradition, a breeding ground for speculation. This prince, this beam of light, Gotama, was the only one who dissolved the darkness. This man Gotama is a universe of wisdom and a world of understanding, a Teacher whose Dhamma is the Way Things Are, instant, immediate and visible all around, eroding desire without harmful side-effects, with nothing else quite like it anywhere in the world.

Hearing this Bāvāri asks Pingiya why, then, he doesn't go and spend his 'every moment' with Gotama. Pingiya's reply tells us a lot about the power of his imagination, he says:

*'You see, Sir,... with constant and careful vigilance it is possible for me to see him with my mind as clearly as with my eyes, in night as well as day. And since I spend my nights revering him, there is not, to my mind, a single moment spent away from him. I cannot now move away from the teaching of Gotama: the powers of confidence and joy, of intellect and imagination hold me there. Whichever way this universe of wisdom goes it draws me with it. Physically, I cannot move like that – my body is decaying, I am old and weak – but the driving power of purposeful thought propels me without break. There was a time when, writhing in the mud of the swamps, I could only drift from one stone to the next. But then I saw the Buddha, fully awake and free from defilement.'*⁶

5 The phrase 'war against imagination' was coined by Diane DiPrima.

6 This comes from a (slightly adapted) translation of the epilogue to the Sutta Nipāta by H. Saddhatissa.

We concluded our evening with a meditation. To begin with we chanted the mantra (sound symbol) of Shākyamūni. As we chanted, we imagined ourselves walking, step-by-step to meet the Buddha, to go and meditate with him. We came into a grove, in a forest, wood or jungle and there, sat ourselves down to meditate, perhaps settling onto a pile of kusa-grass, beside the Buddha. We heard some verses from the Dhammapāda which beautifully evoke the Buddha's qualities before practising the mindfulness of breathing, the practice which the Buddha is said to have been doing when he gained enlightenment.

So to conclude, here are those Dhammapada verses:

*He is calm like the earth that endures.
He is steady like a column that is firm.
He is pure like a lake that is clear.
He is free from samsara – the endless round of suffering.
In the light of his vision
He has found true freedom.
His thoughts are peace,
His words are peace
And his work is peace.*