

# Imagination 2

*'sabbe sattā sukhi hontu' - 'may all beings be well, may all beings be happy'*

## Introduction

These are the notes from the second week of four-week journey with the Bristol Sangha, exploring imagination through the Buddhist tradition and practically, in our own spiritual lives. This week we explore “Mahayana Stories & Parables: watering the roots”. Next week we'll move on to “Tantric Buddhism and the Mandala: transforming energy” and we'll conclude with a week on “Bhante Sangharakshita and our own tradition: the role of imagination in the future of the Buddhist tradition”.

Last week our central image was of the spiritual life as a journey or path. This week we turn to the image of a plant or lotus, symbolising the spiritual life as a process of *growth* rather than as journey. Both are metaphors, ways of describing the spiritual life. Both are necessary and we'll look at the pros and cons later. The plan this week is to explore:

- The Unfolding of the Buddhist Tradition
- The Unfolding of us, as Dharma-farers, followers of the Buddha's teachings
- How to 'discover our own seeds' and go about 'watering the roots' of the 'plant' we most truly are

## The Unfolding of the Buddhist Tradition

My perspective and understanding of this comes particularly from the 3<sup>rd</sup> retreat I ever did, in 1995, at Rivendell, with Saramati, then a Professor of Asian Studies at Montana. Called 'Touching Earth, an environmental seminar', I was drawn to the retreat because I'd been an eco-activist. In fact, following that spark of interest brought me to an extraordinary overview of the history and development of Buddhism *and* Western culture, all in 5 days. It was life-changing. Saramati taught us to see the unfolding of a search for a 'middle way' as it played out in the Buddhist tradition as a whole. That the history of Buddhism could be viewed as a process of what he termed 'therapeutic correction', ie going 'too far' one way... then a shift and back in another direction, crossing and re-crossing the middle ground. Like a boat or aeroplane, which sets out towards a particular destination but has to 'tack', taking into account the prevailing weather conditions.

### *From the early stories of the Buddha to the Mahayana*

The Buddha lived about 500 years before what we call the 'common era'.<sup>1</sup> For the first few hundred years the Buddha's teachings were memorised and passed on by his disciples. To begin with there were just the stories of the life of the Buddha and the oral records of what he taught. These were often filled with evocative symbolism and metaphor, like the *Parable of the Lute*<sup>2</sup> where the Buddha gently helps his disciple Sona to see that using too

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<sup>1</sup> Buddhists don't tend to refer to Christ as a reference point in time, hence we say 'Before Common Era' (BCE) rather than 'BC'/before Christ

<sup>2</sup> Anguttara Nikaya 6.55

much or too little effort in the spiritual life is like having the strings of his lute too taught or too loose. Gradually there began to evolve rules, the 227 rules of the 'vinaya', which is known as the second of the 'three baskets' (or 'tipitaka') of early Buddhist teachings. About 300 years after the Buddha there was a further development, which involved the systematisation of the teachings and their analysis and classification. Most of the stories and metaphors were removed. This much more 'scientific' 'basket' of the Buddha's teachings is known as the 'abhidhamma'. (Which literally means 'about the Dharma').

It was a much more 'dry' way of looking at things, and made for a much more *literalistic* reading of the Buddha's teaching. It pinned things down in a way which many felt resulted in a kind of 'reification'. Reification means 'making something into a Thing'. That there *are* 'no fixed Things' anywhere to be relied upon is a central conclusion of the Buddha's fundamental teaching on the three lakshanas (impermanence, insubstantiality and impermanence). So in endeavouring to 'pin down' what the Buddha said, some say that something vital was lost. Whereas it had been possible, with the poetry and metaphor of early Buddhism to 'catch' the 'middle way' intuitively, it grew more difficult the more the teachings were systematised and codified.

The origins of the Mahayana tradition, which is said to follow from early Buddhism are pretty mysterious. We haven't time to go into the ins and outs of it all now, but suffice it to say this 'new tradition' *did* emerge and, in part, it sought to re-inject magic, imagery, poetry and a *positive* sense of the goal back into the Buddha's teachings. (The earlier tradition had more and more focussed on the *eradication* of unskillfulness and presented the goal, nirvana, in 'negative terms', ie as an '*absence* of unskillfulness/suffering' rather than conjuring up a *positive* sense of what the experience might look and feel like.)

The Mahayana teachings are often described as having 'arrived from the depths'. There are stories about the Perfection of Wisdom teachings being given to Nagarjuna by a naga princess (a female water serpent/dragon) who emerged from the depths of a lake. It's hard to take that literally – and that's the point! The idea is that these later teachings were 'discovered' in the heart-minds of practitioners who meditated deeply and connected *imaginatively* with the heart and spirit of the teachings of the historical Buddha Sakyamuni. There's a truth about how they arose, but it's a truth that's outside the normal constructs of space and time.

There's a lot more I could say about that! But I'll just add Bhante has made clear<sup>3</sup> that whilst it's important to draw on such teachings of 'implicit or interpretable' meaning<sup>4</sup> for inspiration, we *also* need to correlate them with the simple, fundamental principles of 'explicit meaning' from the *earliest* of the Buddha's teachings. It's like we need to keep the basic teachings (on ethics, the lakshanas, the noble eightfold path etc) like a kind of 'tool' in our 'back pocket', by which to measure teachings that evolved later. If we do this, we can ensure that the imagination at work is *creative* imagination and not *reactive* imagination, as we explored last week, ie imagination which leads one to be more skilful, more loving and more free.

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3 See Sangharakshita's *The Inconceivable Emancipation* p151 and also the *Seven Papers* by Subhuthi with Sangharakshita, p104: "the early tradition is the doctrinal and imaginative touchstone for what developed in later centuries"

4 For more on teachings of implicit and explicit meaning, see *The Inconceivable Emancipation*, Sangharakshita's commentary on another Mahayana text, the *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*

## *Both/And: 'Hinayana' and 'Mahayana'*

Now inevitably there was some tension between these two different approaches to the Buddha's teachings. There were those who felt it imperative that the 'letter' was adhered to and those who felt that the 'spirit' was more important. There were those who felt that 'the-path-to-nirvana-by-the-eradication-of-unskillfulness' was the way to go, and others who felt it was much more important to 'water-the-seeds-of-highest-aspiration-within-each-person'. In Mahayana terms, this is the 'Bodhisattva aspiration' or 'ideal' – to gain enlightenment for the sake of all living beings. The rigorous training of a Bodhisattva encompassed the earliest teachings of the Buddha, but brought in the 'world-changing mythic dimension'.

One of the things which Bhante Sangharakshita has done for us is to demonstrate with stunning clarity how we need to, and *can*, learn from *all* aspects of the Buddhist tradition. It's not 'either/or', it's 'both/and'. The Dharma is a remedy to the problem of suffering and we need *whatever will genuinely help us* to alleviate that. This principle – 'critical ecumenism' - is so important that it's one of the 'Six Distinctive Emphases' of the Triratna Order and Community.<sup>5</sup> This ecumenism isn't random eclecticism, but is rather a '*critical*' ecumenism, which, once again, tests what inspires us against those vital early teachings of the Buddha.<sup>6</sup>

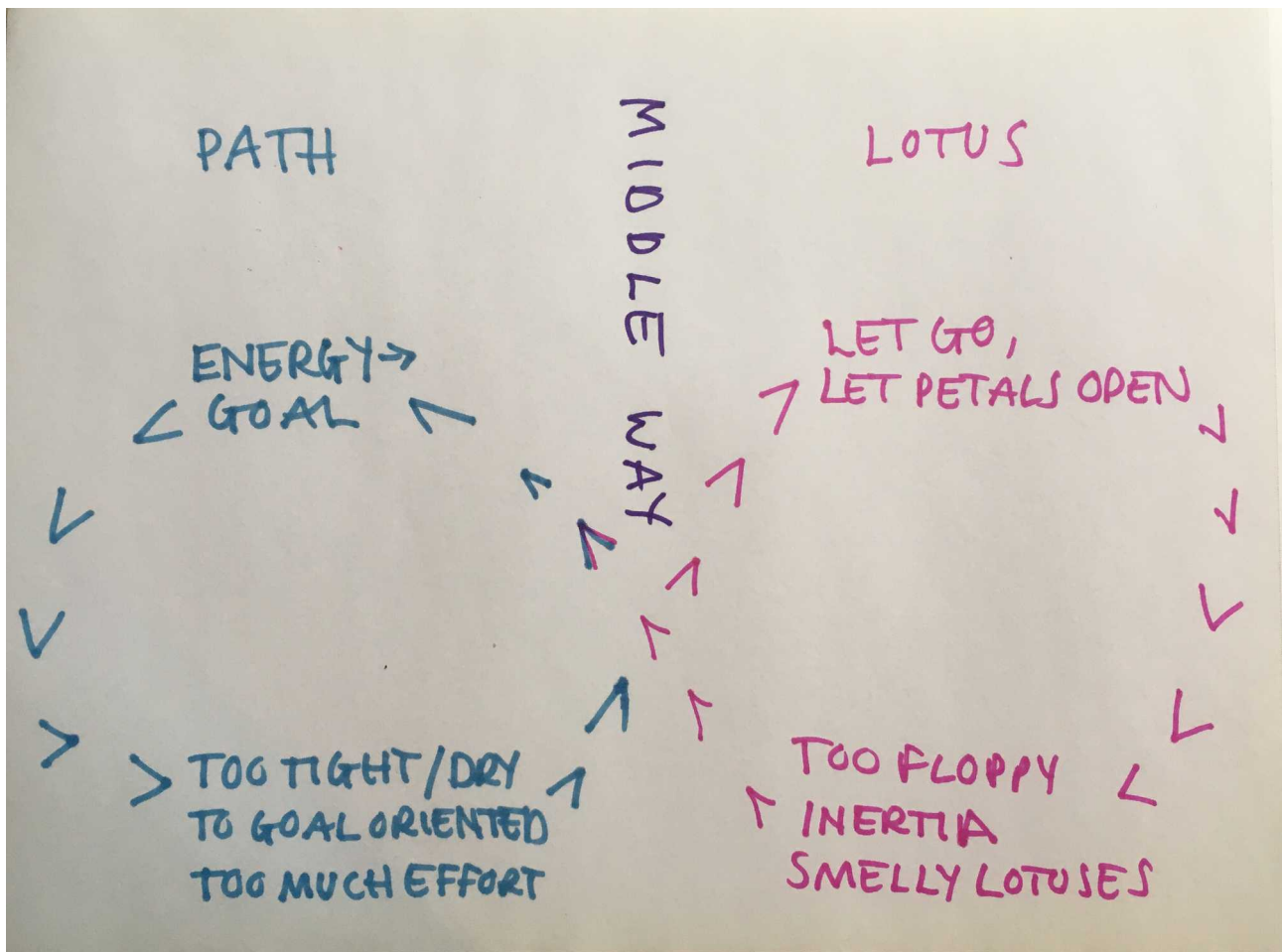
The middle way is a 'higher' perspective that encompasses and *goes beyond all polarities* – including the question of whether we see the spiritual life as a path or as the unfolding of a flower.

It's both. A diagram may help – see overleaf.

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5 See, *The Six Distinctive Emphases of the FWBO*, a talk on freebuddhistaudio by Sangharakshita.

6 See *The Inconceivable Emancipation*, p 65ff on 'The Transcendental Critique of Religion'.



We could have a whole course just on this<sup>7</sup> but the main point is to recognise that *what is needed at different times changes*. There are 'up-sides' and 'down-sides' to both the 'path model' and the 'lotus/plant model' of spiritual practice. Persist with one for too long and you encounter the 'down-side'. A healthy energy in pursuit of the goal can get too tight, dry and wilful. We need to recognise when this happens and it's time to let go, bringing in more relaxation and letting go - a bigger perspective. But. Rest in that for too long and we can go floppy, become prey to inertia. In Buddhist cosmology, it's said that in a god realm, where there's only delight and no suffering, eventually their lotuses go smelly! The lotuses rot because there's no incentive to stir and gather and *use* our energies in a truly 'alive' way.

It's important to add that the Middle Way isn't just some 'mid-point' between extremes on the same 'level'. It's actually 'more than' both poles. It's on another 'level' altogether. It's hard to describe, but it's as if it's a perspective that's 'higher' or 'deeper' that can encompass and 'transcend' all polarities. All this language of 'higher' and 'deeper', 'levels' and 'transcendence' is metaphorical, of course! If we start taking it literally, we're in trouble...<sup>8</sup> Bhante's book, *Wisdom Beyond Words*, is a good place to explore all this.

<sup>7</sup> My understanding of the 'polarity map' model (which is what the diagram above is) comes primarily from Simhanada and I am very grateful to him. He's the man to talk to if you want to explore this more!

<sup>8</sup> Sangharakshita explores this issue of taking metaphors literally in many places and frequently uses 'single inverted commas' or says 'so to speak' to remind us that he's speaking metaphorically. He discusses metaphor at some length in *Metaphors, Magic and Mystery* a more recent collection of his writings and seminars. See the section on 'The Bodhisattva's study of etymology'.

## *The Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sutra*

In 1970 Bhante used a series of lectures on a classic text, the *White Lotus Sutra* to introduce many of the principles of the Mahayana, often seen as the second 'great phase' in the development of Buddhism. He shared a mythic perspective on the unfolding of the Buddhist tradition. In the sutra, the Buddha is teaching tens of thousands of people (in the Mahayana things often happen on a colossal scale). There are monks, arhats, Bodhisattvas, gods and other non-human beings. He preaches to them all from the Vulture's Peak and what he teaches is that there is, in fact, a *higher* goal than simply eradicating negative emotions for one's own benefit. Up to now, the story goes, the teaching has focussed on the individual practitioner striving for personal enlightenment. But now the Buddha's saying 'actually there's a higher goal'. And that higher goal is the desire to attain supreme, perfect, enlightenment for the sake of *all* living beings. Not just for oneself alone. In other words, he teaches the *Bodhisattva Ideal*<sup>9</sup>. Five thousand of the monks who are there walk out. They're not happy. They can't accept that there's more to the Buddha's teaching than what they've been practising. They're not willing or able to let go of their fixed view of what they're doing to embrace 'something more'. In a way we're back to the 'more than' that we talked about last week. There is more to the spiritual life than one's own personal effort. That effort is important. But there's a bigger something and our task as practitioners is to learn to *be receptive to it* and *to participate in it*. Imagination has a vital role to play in this. And as we saw last week with Vessantara's lovely image of 'the Kings and Queens of our energies', they don't get stirred and motivated by our mundane ambitions ('*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 the desire to help alleviate the suffering of all living beings – *that's a big enough project to wake them up!*

This brings us to the heart of what I want us to look at this week. And that's imagining ourselves not as travellers going somewhere on a path (for now), but as plants that are in need of the rain of the Dharma in order to grow and flourish, not just for ourselves, but for the benefit of all beings. This isn't something we do in isolation, we do this as *different* plants growing side-by-side in the same garden, the garden of the Sangha planted in the 'wilderness' of samsara, the mundane world. And in transforming ourselves, we *do* transform the world – one breath at a time, one kindness at a time.<sup>10</sup>

The *White Lotus Sutra* includes the beautiful 'Parable of the Plants' which Bhante talks about in *The Essential Sangharakshita*:

*...Here, individuals are compared not just to lotuses emerging from the mud and slime, but to many different kinds of plants. They are compared to grass, trees, flowers, and shrubs, while the Buddha's teaching is compared to a great rain-cloud. During the winter and summer in India it is very dry and hot for many months. Everything becomes very withered and parched. But then, suddenly, at the beginning of the rainy season, a great black cloud arises in the midst of the sky. There is thunder, lightning, and then the rain falls, very heavily and very steadily,*

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9 Sangharakshita also gave an entire lecture series on *The Bodhisattva Ideal* and followed it up with seminars. These are available on [freebuddhistaudio.com](http://freebuddhistaudio.com) or in book form as *The Bodhisattva Ideal*.

10 The indivisibility of transforming oneself and transforming the world is a central tenet of Bhante's presentation of the Dharma. He explores it further in his lecture series and book on another Mahayana sutra, the *Sutra of Golden Light*. The book is called *Transforming Self and World*.

*day in and day out, sometimes for weeks on end. And as it rains, everything grows. Everything that was so parched and dry becomes green again and starts springing up. All the leaves, all the grass, trees, flowers and shrubs, start to grow again. And everything grows in its own way. The tree grows as a tree, the shrub grows as a shrub, the grass grows as grass, the flower grows as a flower; for the Dharma is just like that rain-cloud: it gives us just the nourishment we each need. It leads us from where it finds us, its starting point – so far as we are concerned – being where we are now, because everyone needs the Dharma in his or her own way. The Dharma is whatever helps us to rise from wherever we are now, and from whatever contributes to the development of the individual.*<sup>11</sup>

We'll hear the parable in full at the start of our meditation after the tea break<sup>12</sup>, but for now I want us to go on to explore:

## **The Unfolding of us as Dharma-farers**

### **Seeds**

So how do we relate all this to us, sitting here, our own imaginations, dreams, aspirations? Let's start by thinking about seeds<sup>13</sup>. What are seeds like?

- little
- not very interesting in themselves
- easy to lose or overlook
- inert – without moisture and warmth

Do we have a sense of metaphorical 'seeds of potential' in us?

Something *in us* that wants to grow and to flower?

Something that wants gradually to unfold towards the light?

Some of us will have this sense, and some of us won't. I certainly didn't, when I started practising. I was pretty sure there was *nothing* good inside of me and a *lot* that I needed to get on with eradicating. I was in a *hurry*. I wanted suffering to end NOW – not just my own, but everybody's. I didn't have time for all that 'waiting-round-for-seeds-to-sprout-and-petals-to-flop-open'-business. I thought it was *my own efforts* which would carry me along the path and I didn't *really* believe there was anything more to it all than that. (Tho' I did also want to save the world...)

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<sup>11</sup> *The Essential Sangharakshita* p94

<sup>12</sup> See *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment, Parables, Myths & Symbols of the White Lotus Sutra* p 120

<sup>13</sup> I didn't have time to talk about the whole idea of 'seeds' in the Yogacara school of Mahayana Buddhism. The Yogacara emphasised meditation experience and developed a model for the transformation of consciousness. Central in this is the idea that we have a kind of metaphorical 'store-house consciousness' in which are 'deposited' the 'seeds' of our skilful and unskilful actions. If we accumulate sufficient 'good seeds' then, eventually, these will outweigh the 'bad seeds' and bring about a 'turning about in the deepest seat of our consciousness', Enlightenment. See eg Sangharakshita's lecture 'Depth Psychology of the Yogacara' on Free Buddhist Audio, or the section on Yogacara in *A Survey of Buddhism*.

## *Watering my 'seeds' with poetry*

I didn't realise how 'dry' and 'arid' my practice was. I was *very* determined. I came across the Dharma in 1993 and went forth from my partner, my home and my career in 1996-7. (I went to work in a Buddhist wholefood shop and live in a community (both with Khemajoti). I sometimes used to give myself headaches when I meditated and quite often I'd get to the end of my tether and feel I'd have to give up practising because it was all *too much effort*. But (obviously) I didn't. I was fortunate. My awareness of dukkha, of suffering, always brought me back. My *friends* helped me find ways to carry on. I kept walking the path.

One day, a year or two after my 'great going forth', a friend told me that there was going to be a writing workshop at the Croydon Buddhist Centre (where the wholefood shop was). A weekend called 'Wolf at The Door' dedicated to exploring and writing poetry. Poetry had been important to me in my teens: I'd written quite a lot and loved to read poetry. But it had rather disappeared out of my life when I was busy with my career in my twenties and then when I found the Dharma when I was 28. I went along to the weekend and heard Ananda and Manjusvara read their poems on the Friday night. On the Saturday, I plunged into my first writing workshop. I *loved* it. It really did feel like old seeds deep inside of me were being watered. As if something dormant and dry inside me was coming to life. I remember saying that I felt 'like a radio that had been retuned', so that I experienced the everyday world around me quite differently. Something inside of me had been woken up by poetry. These days, I often call that part of me 'the muse', and there's a poem by William Stafford (the American poet who so inspired Wolf at The Door) that describes what I experienced:

### ***When I Met My Muse***

*I glanced at her and took my glasses  
off – they were still singing. They buzzed  
like a locust on the coffee table and then  
ceased. Her voice belled forth, and the  
sunlight bent, I felt the ceiling arch, and  
knew that nails up there took a new grip  
on whatever they touched, "I am your own  
way of looking at things," she said. "When  
you allow me to live with you, every  
glance at the world around you will be  
a sort of salvation." And I took her hand.*

*William Stafford*

## **What truly inspires you – and how can you 'water' that inspiration?**

Just as the rain of the Dharma falls on us, whatever kind of plant we are, so we all have different 'seeds within us' which we can recognise and water. What do you *really* long to do? What's your deepest heart-wish that is buried, deep inside waiting for some crack of light to shine upon it, some warmth and moisture to bring it to life?

The Dhammapada says (in one, rather poetic, translation) “Your work is to discover your work, and then with all your heart to give yourself to it”. It's my favourite verse in the whole thing. There's another translation of the same verse (166), which is “No-one can do the work of another.” I find that inspiring too – it tells us that if we don't find and do what we most long to, nobody else is going to do it for us. And *also* that we can't live others' lives for them. We each have to live our very own lives to the best of our inspiration and energy.

Just like plants, we're all different – like these here on the beautiful shrine - some plants have roundy leaves and grow slowly, some plants have spikey leaves and grow fast, some are huge giant redwoods, some are tiny daisies ... and many combinations of the above! In the same way, we all have different seeds, different capacities – introvert/extrovert, calm/energetic, 'more head' or 'more heart', 'more verbal' or 'more non-verbal'...and so on and so on...

As the Buddha taught, comparison is *pointless* – we're going to be *different* plants in the same garden. We're not going to grow like one of those forestry commission plantations with mile after mile of identical tree – we're much more like an ancient forest with huge old oaks, ash trees and sycamores, yew trees, beech trees and spreading chestnuts. 'We' might not even be a tree! We might be a kind of bracken – or fungus – on the forest floor; we might be the ivy growing up a tree or part of a carpet of wood anemones. Nobody can tell, unless we discover what the seeds are in us and give them the conditions to grow...

### *Finding the conditions to grow your seeds*

Some things we *all* have in common, eg

- the need for moisture (rain, the water of inspiration, the Dharma)
- the need for warmth (love, encouragement, friendship)
- the need for space-enough to grow (solitude, retreat, meditation)
- something to spark our interest, to catalyse the energy to 'break out of the seed'

But we all need to find **individually** what really, honestly inspires us. Not what we think *should* inspire us, but what makes us long to go – or *grow* – beyond the confines of the familiar. Ask yourself, honestly, “What 'waters' your seeds?” - it might be some or *none* of the following:

- meditation
- nature
- poetry
- friendship
- music (might not be classical, might be the energy of weird rock music!)
- art
- Dharma study
- going on retreat
- solitude

Whatever it is, we need to **MAKE SPACE FOR IT**, not just 'one day/maybe' but today and this very week – not 'when we have time' or 'when we retire'.. The world needs us to unfold the seeds of our deepest heart-wishes and to become the person we most truly are – for the sake of all beings.