

Week 2 – Who or What do Buddhists Worship?

Buddhism Level 2 – Ritual & Devotion

RESOURCES REQUIRED

- Shrine with space for offerings
- Incense available for offerings
- Your own offerings symbolising your own aspirations, or 3 Jewels.
- A reading that inspires you from a Buddhist figure that inspires feelings of devotion in you.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Connect to own ideals, and the emotional movement of devotion or worship to people who embody them
- Begin to connect to the notion of archetypal Buddhas / Bodhisattvas, and how they are not so different to our own potential
- Have opportunity to make offerings – understand some of the symbolism behind it
- Experience another liturgy – the threefold puja

Salute shrine

MEDITATION (10 MINS)

After short sit, lead into reflection on our own ideals. When I die, how would I like people to talk of me, or how would I want to have lived my life?

What qualities do I value most?

Is there someone historical or whom I know that I respect, or who's a hero to me?

INTRODUCTION TO SESSION

We're approaching what's one of the most troublesome areas of Buddhism for some people – the area that looks most “religious”: worship, devotion, making offerings, bowing etc.

If this is you – it's fine to feel that way. Encourage you to take it at your own pace: remember, don't do anything you'd feel very uncomfortable doing, tho maybe push the comfort zone a little to see what crops up.

Who do Buddhists worship? Why do they worship? These are questions we'll explore. First:

Previous class Review

- “Ritual what why & how”
- Looked at attitudes to ritual – did any ones ring bells for people?

- Various definitions of ritual
- Rituals that we already know in everyday life (weddings, funerals etc)
- Talked of the purpose of ritual to engage all aspects of ourselves, not just the rational conscious part that we usually identify with; help us find emotional counterparts for our intellectual understanding.
- And performed a ritual to dedicate the ritual space.

So start orienting towards the topic of worship...

Exercise: Introductions, reporting in about my hero / idol

[Keep it lighthearted]

Do you have any heroes / idols you relate to? Is there a particular quality about them that you especially admire.

WHAT IS WORSHIP?

Puja = worship

Brainstorm peoples' idea of worship & their responses to the idea.

OED: Homage or reverence paid to a deity; the acts rites or ceremonies of worship; (archaic) worthiness, merit; recognition given or due to these; honour & respect

From Worth-ship. Archaic definition suits better, unless happy to think of Buddha as deity (small d)

A natural flow of appreciation & valuing towards a being that seems to embody our ideals very strongly.

Discussion re. Egalitarianism

Do I accept that there are other people more developed than I? Not just differently developed? How about people very considerably more developed?

If we find this hard to accept, we're living in an egalitarian worldview. Could make development very hard. "Flat earth" = no "up".

Worship & devotion ISNT grovelling, "Oh I'm so rubbish, I'm not worthy"!

It seems to be a natural human impulse to orient to something more than our perceived limitations.

Even the Buddha wanted to worship. Soon after his Enlightenment he thought:

"One suffers if dwelling without reverence or deference."

Realising there was no living being more perfected than he, he reflected:

"What if I were to dwell in dependence on this very Dhamma to which I have fully awakened, honoring and respecting it?"

SN 6.2

[Probably best talk of your own attitude to worship]

Exercise in 3s: Discuss your attitude to worship / devotion.

Do you find it repugnant or enjoyable? How do you relate to the idea of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and reverencing them?

WHO OR WHAT DO BUDDHISTS WORSHIP?

Read through verses 1-3 (not refuges & precepts) of 7fp (We'll recite it properly next week)

Conquerors / Protectors / Princes of the Sages all referring to Buddhas & Bodhisattvas.

Different ways we can relate:

- Keep it "literal": the historical Buddha, his disciples, and everyone since then who has achieved transcendental insight
- Connect more archetypally: not just the "historical Buddha", but all Buddhas of past and present, and the archetypal Buddhas in the 5 Buddha mandala. And all the archetypal Bodhisattvas as well as literal Bodhisattvas.

How do you relate to the so-called Archetypal figures?

As if they are figures that appear at the furthest extent of our imagination / intuition, representing a truth just out of our reach.

Does that mean they're only in the imagination?

Yes, but the same can be said for the world. Saying in what way, say Amitabha is less real to me (if I relate to him strongly) than the wooden carving on the shrine is not easy.

If my connection to Amitabha has an effect, an apparent life of its own, then to what extent is it non-existent?

Happy to believe in electricity & gravity, though we can't see them

Whole problem is in the terminology of exists / doesn't exist. In daily life we need it; when we are talking about the transcendental figures, it's no longer useful.

If beings have gained Enlightenment, then what is their status now? We can't answer this question.

The mind of a Buddha, we are told, is freed from all claims of 'me' and 'mine'. Buddhas do not, as we do, automatically and unconsciously erect barriers between themselves and the flow of conditions about them. In the mind of a Buddha there is no rigid boundary between self and other, no fixed ego-identity separating itself off from the flow of impressions, no unyielding barrier between the image and the imagination in which the image occurs. Ultimately, therefore, from the point of view of Enlightenment, there is no 'self' and no 'other'. No subject, no object, and no existential status.

The Refuge Tree, Bodhichitta and 'Other Power', *Kulananda in Teachers of Enlightenment*

Engaging in Buddhist ritual is an opportunity to soften our hard-edged understandings of the world, and open up to a little mystery, act "as if", be receptive to possibilities outside of our experience.

The Buddha expressed this slightly differently:

"Whoever sees me sees the Dhamma; whoever sees the Dhamma sees me" (SN XXII.87)

This is pointing towards the fact that the physical bodily form is an arbitrary, misleading detail when it comes to relating to Enlightened beings (and unenlightened beings!) So the tradition has conjured forms that imaginatively indicate something of the essence of the Enlightened mind symbolically through form.

Eg. The beautiful luminous red body of the Buddha of love, Amitabha.

TEA BREAK

PERSONAL EXPLORATION BY LEADER

[At this juncture I recommend you talk personally about a figure – probably from the Refuge tree – who you feel devoted to or inspired by. Maybe best a figure who has produced some reading that you can read out, someone with a strong voice eg. Milarepa, Padmasambhava. Or the Buddha. Try to invoke a sense of awe, recognising this person is someone from a different league. Best this comes strongly from your own voice]

Exercise in 3s

Share what you consider to be your highest values, your ideals. Could be your way of understanding the Three Jewels if you like. Can talk about the object you chose for the shrine if you wish.

SYMBOLISM OF OFFERINGS



Bowing: show anjali mudra – jewel in lotus. Symbol of recognising our own potential, bowing down to someone who's realised that potential. Or bowing to that potential in us – projected out onto Buddha image or embodied in a Buddha image.

Bowing to the Buddha “out there” or to our potential “in here” ultimately isn't so different; relate to it in whatever way is useful.

We want to come in contact with it; make known our devotion, valuing of it – hence making offerings.

Practicalities

No right way – people usually bow before or after or both, but not essential. Feel free to offer in whatever way you like.

ELEMENTS OF SHRINE

Point out different parts of shrine, flag up 3 traditional offerings that will appear in 3 fold puja. Also offering bowls – anyone want to empty & fill with water each week?

But can build your own shrine however you want; make it meaningful to you, incorporate symbols that speak to you.

Can be good to use materials that reflect your environment, local plants etc.

ETIQUETTE

If you're last one in a shrine room, always extinguish the candles.

THREEFOLD PUJA

With mantra (Shakyamuni?) at end in which people can make offerings of incense or the object(s) they've brought with.

HOME PRACTICE

I suggest that you create a small “shrine” somewhere in your house, if you don’t already have one. Negotiate (if necessary) a corner that will be special to you, preferably where you meditate. Decorate it in a way you find pleasing. And place the object(s) on it that you brought in today, or that in some way represent your aspirations. Perform a dedication ceremony by it if you like, to dedicate this space to the Three Jewels. Find some way to ritually “warm it up”; maybe by bowing to it each day, saying a short inspiration verse etc.

FURTHER READING

The Refuge Tree, Bodhichitta and ‘Other Power’, Kulananda in *Teachers of Enlightenment* or at:

<http://www.madhyamavani.fwbo.org/2/refugetree.html>

The Cave, a short story by Sangharakshita, describing what it may have been like to meet the Buddha. CD P05