

## **Transformation of Self and World** **in the Sutra of Golden Light**

In this term we encounter the second of our three Mahayana scriptures: *The Sutra of Golden Light (Suvarnabhasottamasutra)*. Like the White Lotus Sutra, it is rich in imagery and symbolism. In his commentary on the sutra, Sangharakshita introduces us to the practice of confession (U3) and discusses its crucial importance in the spiritual life. He also revisits and amplifies the theme of the transformation of society, first introduced in U5 of *The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path*, and explored again in U3-4 of *Buddhism For The Modern World: The Vision of the FWBO*. This topic is discussed in the context of an exploration of the mythical figures featuring in the text, such as the Four Great Kings and the Goddesses Sri, Sarasvati, and Drdha.

### **Primary Study Material**

The primary study material for this term is the series of lectures Sangharakshita gave on the Sutra of Golden Light, published by Windhorse as *Transforming Self and World*. The original lectures can also be accessed from [www.freebuddhistaudio.com/](http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/).

1. **The Growth of a Mahayana Sutra**
2. **The Bodhisattva's Dream**
3. **The Spiritual Significance of Confession**
4. **The Protectors of The Dharma**
5. **Buddhism and Culture**
6. **Nature, Man and Enlightenment**
7. **Buddhist Economics**
8. **The Moral Order and Its Upholders**

### **Suggested Further Reading**

1. *Transforming Self and World* by Sangharakshita (Windhorse)
2. *The Sutra of Golden Light* translated by R.E. Emmerick, (Pali Text Society)
3. *The Eternal Legacy* by Sangharakshita (Windhorse), CC. 1,2,8,15
4. *A Concise History of Buddhism* by Andrew Skilton (Windhorse), C11-12
5. *Sangharakshita- A New Voice* by Subhuti (Windhorse), C 9-10

## Suggested Further Reading by Unit

- U1: *Mahayana Buddhism* by Paul Williams (Routledge), introduction  
U2: *Shamanism* by Mircea Eliade; C5 (on the drum), C2 (on dreams)  
U3: *Bhaddali Sutta* from Majjhima Nikaya (65); *Know Your Mind* by Sangharakshita (Windhorse), pp.125-9 (on hiri and ottapa).  
U4: *Buddhist Cosmology* by Randy Kloetzli (Motilal); Dante's *Divine Comedy*  
U5: *The Religion of Art* by Sangharakshita (Windhorse); *Buddhism and the West* by Sangharakshita (Windhorse pamphlet)  
U6: *Forty-Three Years Ago* By Sangharakshita (Windhorse), *Was the Buddha a Bhikkhu?* By Sangharakshita (Windhorse)  
U7: *Vision and Transformation* by Sangharakshita (Windhorse); chapter on right livelihood, Ghatikara Sutta (Majjhima Nikaya 81); *Small is Beautiful* by E.F. Schumacher, chapter on Buddhist Economics  
U8: *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles; 'Going forth and Citizenship' by Subhuti, in *Western Buddhist Review* 1; *Who is the Buddha?* By Sangharakshita (Windhorse), C7

## Study Questions

### Unit 1 The Growth of a Mahayana Sutra

1. How would you talk about your own model/metaphor for the spiritual life?
2. How can the Mahayana be characterised? Identify three key features.
3. From your experience so far, what is the distinctive spiritual value of a Mahayana Sutra as opposed to a Pali Sutta?
4. In what way is a Mahayana Sutra a 'world'?
5. If you have read any or all of the sutra, what are your initial responses to it?
6. Does the Mahayana approach to the Dharma have any dangers?
7. Reflect on the symbolism of the golden light. What does it convey?

### Unit 2 The Bodhisattva's Dream

1. Do you agree that we shouldn't take life for granted? If so, why not?
2. How might you more fully embody the attitude to life expressed by the Zen practitioner when he rejoices: 'How wonderful! I draw water and carry fuel.'
3. How is a 'problem' to be distinguished from a 'difficulty'?

4. Reflect on a 'problem' that you have had in your spiritual life. How did you resolve it or how are you working to resolve it?

5. Why do you think that it is a golden drum that speaks forth the confessional verses?
6. What significance, if any, do dreams have in your life?
7. How can the Buddha's life be 'immeasurable'?
8. What do you think the figure beating the drum represents?
9. How do you respond to the idea of 'spiritual death'?

### Unit 3 The Spiritual Significance of Confession

1. What is confession?
2. Have you practised confession? If so, reflect on any benefits that you have gained from it.
3. Are there any dangers associated with practising confession?
4. Clarify the distinctions made between 'psychological', 'spiritual', and 'transcendental' in this lecture.
5. What is guilt and how is it different from shame (*hiri*)?
6. Is there a role for forgiveness in relation to confession?
7. Discuss the importance of apology in the context of confession.

### Unit 4 The Protectors of the Dharma

1. Can the cosmology of Mount Meru have any significance for the Western Buddhist? If so what?
2. What forces do the four great kings embody in the life of the individual?
3. What forces do the four great kings embody in the collective life of society?
4. 'There can be no healthy culture or civilisation without some basis in transcendental values.' What does this mean?
5. Why is there no purely psychological, or even spiritual, positivity?
6. What do the hordes of non-human beings symbolise?
7. What do the 4 promises made by the kings signify?

### Unit 5 Buddhism and Culture

1. How can 'essential Buddhism' be distinguished from eastern cultural trappings?
2. 'Buddhism has to learn the language of Western culture.' What do you think this might mean in practice?
3. Reflect and comment on one or more of Sarasvati's promises.

4. What dangers might there be in communicating the Dharma through Western culture?
5. Discuss your attitude to eastern cultural expressions of Buddhism. Are there any aspects of it that you think are not really relevant in the West?
6. Are there any principles/teachings that are not emphasised by Eastern Buddhism that are likely to be central to a Western expression of Buddhism?
7. What do you think the advantages/disadvantages are of being a Westerner (as opposed to an Eastern person) in relation to encountering Buddhism?

### **Unit 6 Nature, Man, and Enlightenment**

1. Is the monastic ideal relevant to a Western expression of Buddhism?
2. Why do you think Dharma will become stronger when the Sutra of Golden Light is preached?
3. 'The right use of nature is part of the spiritual life.' What do you think this could mean in practice?
4. What does it mean to say that nature is samsara? Do you agree?
5. 'You cannot be totally committed unless you are free from all mundane ties and responsibilities.' Reflect on the meaning and implications of this.
6. Discuss the image of the monk as described by Sangharakshita.
7. 'Man is a being in conflict with himself.' Do you see yourself in this way? What is the nature of this conflict?
8. Comment on the apparent equation of the feminine principle with unenlightenment (samsara) and the masculine principle with enlightenment (nirvana).

### **Unit 7 Buddhist Economics**

1. Do you think individual wealth is incompatible with the spiritual life? Explain your view.
2. Would it be practicable – or even desirable – for you to live with no possessions/money? Would there be any dangers in doing this?
3. Do you think capitalism is unethical? Explain your view.
4. Comment on your attitude to the notion of a Dana economy. Does it make you more willing to give or do you take more? Is it sometimes better to pay than give?

5. Would you want to support 'economically unproductive' spiritual practitioners? Explain your attitude.
6. 'The Buddhist life is the life of giving.' To what extent do you see your own spiritual life in these terms? Discuss your practice of Dana.
7. Reflect on your attitude to money/wealth. Is it a touchy subject for you?
8. What do you think about the FWBO principle of 'support' rather than wages? Is this a better system? Does it have disadvantages?

### **Unit 8 The Moral Order and its Upholders**

1. Should one respect and abide by a law that one consider unjust?
2. Reflect and comment on the spiritual symbolism of kingship in the life of the individual.
3. Reflect and comment on the spiritual symbolism of kingship in the life of society.
4. Is there such a thing as 'undeserved suffering'?
5. To what extent does our social order mirror the karmic order?
6. Is there a place for punishment within the spiritual community?
7. What are the consequences of a break down in the moral order?
8. What does it mean to subordinate the power mode to the love mode? Come up with some examples.

*This material was originally compiled by Nagapriya for the distance-learning version of the Mitra Study Course and has subsequently been edited and updated by Sacchanama.*