

## Year 3

In term 6 we encountered the Bodhisattva Ideal, explored what a bodhisattva is, learnt about the bodhicitta, and studied the six paramitas (transcending virtues). Year 3 focuses exclusively on exploring Mahayana Buddhism more thoroughly and it does this by introducing three traditional Mahayana scriptures: The White Lotus Sutra, The Sutra of Golden Light, and the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa.

The primary study material for each term is a series of lectures by Sangharakshita which functions as a commentary on each of the scriptures. However, if at all possible you should try to read the relevant scripture alongside the lectures since, by doing this, you will gain a fuller appreciation of its value.

### General Reading List for Year 3

1. *The Bodhisattva Ideal* by Sangharakshita (Windhorse)
2. 'The Bodhisattva Principle' by Sangharakshita from *The Priceless Jewel* (Windhorse).
3. *Mahayana Buddhism* by Paul Williams (Routledge).
4. *Meeting The Buddhas* by Vessantara (Windhorse)
5. *Wisdom Beyond Words* by Sangharakshita (Windhorse)
6. *The Bodhicaryavatara* Shantideva. Trans. Crosby and Skilton (Windhorse and OUP).
7. *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, Har Dayal (Motilal Banarsidass).
8. *A Survey of Buddhism* (Windhorse), Cc2-4
9. *A Concise History of Buddhism* by Andrew Skilton (Windhorse), C11-13
10. *What is the Dharma?* (Windhorse), C13

### Parables, Myths and Symbols of Mahayana Buddhism in the White Lotus Sutra

Term 7 introduces the *White Lotus Sutra*, a text that uses stories, parables, and fantastic symbolism to put across its message. As Sangharakshita says "...the language of images is the language of the imagination, the language of the emotions. It is the language of poetry, the language of myth and symbol, simile and metaphor. Concepts address the conscious mind, but images

appeal to the unconscious". The parables explored in this series - the Burning House, The Return Journey, The Jewel in the Garment, the Magic City, the Medicinal Herbs, and the Good Physician - have become part of the culture of the FWBO, enriching our understanding of what it means to live the spiritual life.

### **Primary Study Material**

The primary study material for this term is found in *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment* by Sangharakshita (Windhorse) which comprises edited versions of the original lectures that he gave on the *White Lotus Sutra* and selections of question and answer sessions on related topics. The original lectures can also be accessed from [www.freebuddhistaudio.com/](http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/) .

- 1. The Universal Perspective of Mahayana Buddhism**
- 2. The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment**
- 3. Transcending the Human Predicament**
- 4. The Myth of the Return Journey**
- 5. Symbols of Life and Growth**
- 6. The Five Element Symbolism and the Stupa**
- 7. The Jewel in the Lotus**
- 8. The Archetype of the Divine Healer**

### **Suggested Further Reading for Term 7**

Sangharakshita, *Alternative Traditions*, (Windhorse) C7

Sangharakshita, *The Eternal Legacy* (Windhorse) C9

Williams, Paul, *Mahayana Buddhism* (RKP), C7

U7: 'The Priceless Jewel' from Sangharakshita, *The Priceless Jewel* (Windhorse)

### **Translations**

*Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, trans. L. Hurvitz (Columbia University Press)

*The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, trans. Bunno Kato et al (Weatherhill/Kosei)

*The Lotus Sutra*, B. Watson (Columbia)

## Study Questions

### Unit 1 The Universal Perspective of Mahayana Buddhism

1. Reflect on the meaning of the simile of Indra's Net as used here. Why does Sangharakshita bring it in?
2. Reflect on and then summarise the distinctions made here between the Mahayana and Hinayana
3. In what way is the Mahayana perspective 'universal'.
4. 'We can't fully understand any one aspect of the Dharma unless we understand the whole of it.' (p.8) What does this mean?
5. 'Each time we discover a new way of exploring the Buddhist path, our understanding is completely transformed.' (p.8) Can you give an example of this from your own experience?
6. Why does the White Lotus Sutra communicate by means of parables, myths, and symbols?
7. Compare and contrast the images of the bodhisattva and the arahat. What do they embody?
8. Reflect and comment on the meaning of the parable of famine presented on pp.15-17.
9. Why is it important to speak both the language of images and the language of concepts?

### Unit 2 The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment

1. What is a Sutra?
2. What are the central teachings of the White Lotus Sutra and why do you think it emphasises them?
3. 'In reality, the Buddha is not outside us. The Buddha nature is not outside us, but within us...' (p.39) Reflect and then comment on what this statement means to you.
4. Who or what is the Ananda within? What is his role?
5. Reflect on the incident of the 5000 disciples walking out. What does it symbolise?
6. What are your initial impressions of the Sutra? Reflect and then summarise your thoughts.
7. Comment on the meaning of the parable of the magic city.
8. According to Sangharakshita, how should one read a Mahayana Sutra?
9. Why do you think that the Sutra goes to such lengths to describe fantastic scenes and images? What impact do they have on you?
10. Why is this lecture called 'The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment'?

### Unit 3 Transcending the Human Predicament

1. Reflect on the Parable of the Burning House. What does it communicate to you?
2. How do parables work as teaching devices?
3. Reflect on the story of Krishna's flute. Does the metaphor of the call resonate with you? Have you heard the call? If so, what did it say?
4. What is meant by 'skilful means'?
5. 'A subjective and sectarian approach to the truth is much more attractive for many people than a more objective, universal approach.' (p.77) Do you think this is true? If so, why do you think people are like this?
6. 'The closer people come to the goal, the more their paths converge.' (p.79) What are the implications of this?
7. 'Any kind of life that involves no positive, deliberate effort to evolve is escapism.' (p.81) Reflect and comment on this statement.
8. Is the parable of the burning house a parable about universalism?
9. Comment on the final paragraph of the lecture (pp.80-81). Do you share Sangharakshita's optimism?

### Unit 4 The Myth of the Return Journey

1. What metaphor/myth would you choose to describe your life? Why?
2. Reflect on the myth of the return journey. Which aspects of it strike you most strongly and why?
3. 'When the poor man saw this rich man seated there on his throne, in all his state, he was absolutely terrified...and he hurried away, without the faintest idea that the rich man was his own father.' (p.91-2) Reflect and comment on this episode of the parable (cf.pp.99-100)
4. What is the 'higher self' (p.95)?
5. 'Time has nothing to do with Enlightenment.' (p.96) What do you think Sangharakshita means here?
6. What is the significance of the parable of the poisoned arrow (p.97)?
7. The poor man is driven by need to the rich man's door. Do you think we need to be desperate in order to engage effectively with the spiritual life?
8. Do you see your life in terms of service? How might seeing your life in this way be spiritually beneficial?
9. Comment on the means that the father uses in order to reunite himself with his son. What do you think this symbolises?

10. William James wrote that a religious person is not simply someone who has religious experiences but someone who makes those experiences the centre of their lives (p.101). Reflect and comment on this suggestion.

### **Unit 5 Symbols of Life and Growth**

1. Reflect and comment on plant symbolism within Buddhism. What does it communicate?
2. How can we avoid mistaking a merely intellectual journey through the stages of the spiritual life for real experience (p.125)?
3. Reflect and comment on the meaning of the rain cloud in the context of the parable. Does it appeal to you?
4. 'The paradox is that although we each become more and more different from one another as we grow and develop, at the same time we also become more and more like one another'. (p.129) Comment on your own experience in relation to this remark.
5. 'In the West today spiritual progress is more likely to take place within a secular context than within a conventional religious one.' (p.130) Comment on this.
6. Why might a sectarian attitude be unhelpful? How can avoid falling into such an attitude?
7. Is regimentation a bad thing? Explain your answer. Is the FWBO unhelpfully regimented?
8. How do you engage your emotions in your spiritual life?

### **Unit 6 Five Element Symbolism and the Stupa**

1. Reflect on your response to the symbol of the stupa. What, if anything, does it mean to you?
2. Reflect and then comment on the meaning of the appearance of the Buddha 'Abundant Treasures.'
3. Comment on the spiritual significance of the space element (*akasha*) in the context of the stupa symbolism.
4. Comment on the spiritual significance of the water element
5. How do the five elements relate to different kinds of energy?
6. In what way is the stupa a synthesis of solar and lunar symbolism?
7. Reflect on comment on the relationship between the five elements and their colour symbols.

## Unit 7 The Jewel in the Lotus

1. 'Mantras are phrases used to invoke the dormant spiritual forces within our own minds; indeed, in a sense, they are the names of these spiritual forces.' (p.170) What do you think this means?
2. What is an archetypal bodhisattva?
3. Reflect and comment on the symbolism of the jewel.
4. Reflect on the parable of the hidden jewel. Does it accord with your experience or not?
5. 'All life is ultimately heading in the direction of Enlightenment.' (p.182) What do you think this means and do you agree?
6. Reflect and comment on the myth of Avalokiteshvara.
7. What are the gradual and sudden methods (p.175)?
8. Reflect and comment on the symbolism of the lotus.

## Unit 8 The Archetype of the Divine Healer

1. What is an archetype?
2. In what way are we sick? What would it mean to be healed?
3. What is the significance of the story of Bhaisajyaguru burning himself?
4. 'We should be prepared even to sacrifice our lives for the Dharma if necessary.' (p.201) What do you think about this? Are you prepared to make sacrifices for the Dharma?
5. Are you convinced by the parable of the good physician? Does it hold true in your experience?
6. Identify some of the ways in which we could misuse the Dharma and therefore harm ourselves.
7. Do you think that the Buddha's death was 'encouraging' (p.202)?
8. '...The biggest compliment that the Buddha pays humanity is to disappear.' (p.205) Comment on this.

*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 Saccanama.*