

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 5: Buddhism and the Triratna Buddhist Community, Devotional Practice

Week 1: An Overview of the Buddhist Tradition

Introduction to Part 5 of the Course

When we become mitras we assert that the Triratna Buddhist Community is the context in which we want to practice the Dharma, at least for the foreseeable future. In the first three sessions of Part 5 of the course we will explore what this means, by looking at how Triratna fits in to the wider context of Buddhist history and Buddhist schools, by looking at the style of practice within Triratna – and why it is what it is – and by looking at some of the distinctive features of Triratna that distinguish it from other Buddhist schools you might come across.

The last four sessions of Part 5 focus on ritual and devotional practice. We will look at the purpose of ritual, and we will explore the main devotional practices used in Triratna in some detail. In this first session of Part 5 we will give a brief history of the different schools and styles of Buddhism, to help us to see the Triratna Buddhist Community in its broader context.

The Diversity of Buddhism (Text purpose-written by Vadanya)

Buddhism is an ancient tradition, and even before its recent spread to the West it had taken root over an enormous tract of the Earth's surface, from Iran in the West to Japan in the East, from the cold dry plains of Mongolia in the North to the lush tropical Island of Java – on a similar latitude to North Australia – in the South. As a result Buddhism now exists in a number of forms, each of which has been heavily influenced by the particular culture in which it developed. On the surface these schools can look completely different, and even seem to be offering different paths. This can be confusing for the Westerner who wants to get an overview of Buddhism, rather than simply accepting one of these schools at face value as 'real' Buddhism. In this session we will try to give the basics of such an overview, by briefly summarising the history of Buddhism, and pointing out where some of the main schools present in the West fit in.

'Original' Buddhism

The Buddha was born near the present-day India/Nepal border, probably some time between about 560 and 480 BCE. He died 80 years later. After his death his teachings were passed on both as an oral tradition, and as a tradition of example and practice. Nothing seems to have been written down until at least three hundred years after the Buddha's death, by which time different approaches to practice had already developed, so we cannot be completely sure what 'original Buddhism' looked like.

However, we can probably be fairly sure about a few things. We can be fairly sure that the Buddha recommended a radical withdrawal from ‘worldly’ concerns and giving up all possessions and family ties as the most useful lifestyle for achieving spiritual liberation. Hence many of the Buddha’s early disciples lived as homeless beggars, sleeping and meditating under trees, and eating whatever they were given. We can also be sure that the Buddha taught other styles of practice to householders whose responsibilities did not allow them to live this way, and the early scriptures mention that some of these ‘lay’ disciples did in fact gain Insight.

We can be fairly sure, from the Buddha’s example, from the example of his most advanced disciples, and from the oldest parts of the oldest records, that the Buddha taught that the spiritual life should be lived – in the words he so often used – ‘for the welfare of the many’. In other words he taught that the spiritual life is not just about looking for individual liberation, it is about helping the spiritual evolution of the human race. So he and his early disciples saw spreading the Dharma, and creating Sangha as an integral part of their practice. We can also be sure that he taught that we need to work hard on our own liberation if we want to be of use to others – until we stop being part of the problem we cannot be part of the solution. In the earliest scriptures he seems to have recommended a range of practices to help bring this liberation about, suited to the needs and temperament of the individual or group he was talking to.

As a minimum baseline he recommended a harmless, generous, upright ethical life. He advised people to develop a warm loving heart for other beings. He recommended spiritual friendship as the essential foundation for spiritual growth. He taught that developing clear mindfulness of our body, our thoughts, and our feelings was an indispensable part of spiritual growth. He taught that we need to learn to focus our mind in meditation to begin to see things as they really are. Triratna Buddhists would probably recognise many of the practices taught in the early Sangha – for example we would probably recognise the Five Precepts, the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Mettā Bhāvanā.

The Early Sangha

During the Buddha’s lifetime and for many years after his death the hard core of his followers lived as ‘forest renunciates’, sleeping for most of the year in the open air, meditating under trees, begging for food, and renouncing all but the very simplest possessions. During the monsoon period these forest renunciates would settle down for the rainy season retreat, gathering in huts or shelters to meditate and study the Dharma together. As time passed more and more renunciates opted to prolong this relatively comfortable settled lifestyle, until many were living all year round in buildings donated by wealthy lay disciples, perhaps near the palaces of generous patrons, where food, robes and medicine were easy to come by. In this way the settled monastic lifestyle – which is such a prominent feature of many schools of Buddhism today – gradually developed, almost certainly long after the death of the Buddha.

In this way three strands developed in the early Sangha. There were the forest renunciates – uncompromising, loosely organised, maybe a little wild, a little magical. Then there were the settled monastics – needing a higher degree of organisation, more able to spread the Dharma to the wider community, but also more dependent on the approval of wealthy donors, and more in danger of becoming comfortable and respectable, and so losing their spiritual edge. And finally there were the ‘laypeople’, who combined spiritual practice with the time-consuming business of raising a family and earning a livelihood. All three were necessary parts of a joint enterprise dedicated to raising the spiritual level of the human race.

The Sthaviras and the Mahāsāṃghikas

By perhaps 150 years after the death of the Buddha a split had developed in the early Sangha, between those who called themselves the Sthaviras – or ‘elders’ – and those who termed themselves the Mahāsāṃghikas – those of the greater Sangha, or perhaps those who were in the majority. The exact details of the dispute are blurred by time, but we can conclude that the Sthaviras were a conservative group who were concerned to keep to the letter of the teachings, who emphasised a highly regulated monastic life, and who opposed any innovations. The Mahāsāṃghikas on the other hand seem to have felt that the ‘Elders’ had lost touch with the spirit of the Buddha’s teachings, they took a more liberal attitude to innovations which expressed the spirit of the teachings in new ways, they placed a less exclusive emphasis on monasticism, and they were more concerned to include styles of practice suited to householders. They may also have preserved teachings and practices dating back to the Buddha which the Sthaviras had come to ignore.

‘Hīnayāna’ and Mahāyāna

The dispute between Sthaviras and the Mahāsāṃghikas prefigured a major parting of the ways between different styles of Buddhism. At around the beginning of the Christian Era the spiritual descendants of the Mahāsāṃghikas seem to have coalesced into a new movement called the Mahāyāna, the Great Vehicle or Great Way. Most of the schools of Buddhism we see in the world today belong to the Mahāyāna or its offshoot, the Vajrayāna. The only exception is the Theravada school of South-east Asia, which traces its heritage back to the Sthaviras.

The followers of the Mahāyāna called the path practised by the spiritual descendants of the Sthaviras the ‘Hīnayāna’, the Lesser Vehicle or Small Way, indicating that they thought it was less universally applicable, and led to a lesser goal. They criticised followers of this path for seeing the spiritual life as a self-centred quest for individual salvation, rather than as contributing to the overall spiritual evolution of all beings. They caricatured what they saw as a small-minded obsession with monastic rules. And they felt that the so-called Hīnayānists had become so attached to particular details of practice that they had lost sight of the overall purpose these practices were meant to serve – they were mistaking the means for the end.

The Bodhisattva Ideal

Mahāyāna Buddhists re-emphasised the importance of cultivating a warm compassionate attitude towards other living beings. They developed a more explicit stress on selfless action for others. And they developed a new version of the Buddhist spiritual ideal, distinct from the older ideal of the Arahant – literally ‘Worthy One’ – which in the minds of some people had come to imply a cold, negative detachment. The spiritual ideal for Mahāyāna Buddhism is not someone who is liberated from this world and lives in a state of bliss, it is someone who has seen beyond the world as we know it, but still chooses to work in the world and for the good of the world, out of a deep sense of solidarity with other living beings.

This spiritual ideal was called, in Sanskrit, the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva Ideal served a dual purpose for Mahāyāna Buddhists, because it both stressed the selfless, compassionate aspect of Enlightenment, which they felt that ‘Hīnayāna’ Buddhists had lost sight of, and because it was a goal that could be aimed for by all Buddhists, regardless of whether or not they lived a monastic lifestyle.

Cosmic Vision

Mahāyāna Buddhists tended to see the Buddha as an archetype of Enlightenment that could be contacted in meditation – or even as a force in the universe – rather than as limited historical being. They explored and expanded this archetypal, mythic realm of practice, connecting in meditation with a range of different Buddha and Bodhisattva figures associated with different aspects of the Enlightened Mind. They developed a vast vision of a magical, multidimensional universe in which we can align ourselves with cosmic forces working for the Enlightenment of all beings, and they expressed this vision in amazing, rambling sūtras, which can read like grand spiritual science fiction, and are a far cry from the usually quite down-to-earth suttas of the Pāli Canon of the Theravada.

Skilful Means

Mahāyāna Buddhism tended to see all the teachings and practices of Buddhism as ‘skilful means’, ways to help people of different types and spiritual levels develop towards an Enlightenment which at the moment they could not understand or imagine. After all, the Buddha himself had said that his vision would be incomprehensible to human beings, and he had only decided to teach because he realised that we could be helped to grow to the point where we would see the truth for ourselves. So he had in effect admitted that his teachings were a skilful means to help us grow, rather than the incomprehensible truth itself, and he had also said that compared to all the possible truth teachings, the ones that he had given for his time and place were like a handful of leaves compared to all the leaves in the forest.

So, because all teachings are skilful means, the Mahāyānists saw nothing wrong with developing new teachings and practices to suit different temperaments,

lifestyles, and cultures, as long as these were within the spirit if not the letter of the Buddha's teaching. This allowed them to be far more flexible and effective in adapting to changed historical circumstances and new cultures, and it allowed them to evolve forms of practice suited to a much wider range of people.

This innovative tendency in Mahāyāna Buddhism is largely responsible for the bewildering array of different schools, philosophies, and practices we see in Buddhism today. According to our temperament we might see this creativity as either a good or a bad thing, but it is probably both. On the one hand Mahāyāna Buddhism has helped far more people to grow towards Enlightenment than would have been possible if it had kept strictly to the practices taught by the historical Buddha. On the other hand, some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism hardly seem to be Buddhism at all, and their practices no longer have much in common with those taught by the historical Buddha.

The Vajrayāna

From roughly 500CE onwards a third major branch of Buddhism emerged out of the Mahāyāna in India. This was the Vajrayāna, the 'Diamond Vehicle', sometimes called Tantric Buddhism. The Vajrayāna uses a range of powerful symbols and rites to contact and engage the full subconscious energies of the individual, and to use these energies to propel the practitioner towards Enlightenment. Tantric Buddhism is an 'esoteric' tradition, in the sense that it depends on direct initiation and a close teacher-disciple relationship with a guru. In Tibetan Buddhism it was, in the past at least, always stressed that the Vajrayāna is an advanced form of practice, for those who have already achieved a high degree of renunciation and developed a compassionate, altruistic motivation for their practice. For others it was said that the methods of the Vajrayāna would be useless, or even dangerous.

Vajrayāna Buddhism grew out of the Mahāyāna, and it uses magical ritual, mantras and visualisation practices to strive for the aim of Mahāyāna Buddhism – Enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Perhaps as a reaction to the high-flown cosmic perspectives and metaphysical speculations of the Mahāyāna, the Vajrayāna emphasises direct experience. It therefore developed a new understanding of the 'Three Refuges' in which one's guru was seen as embodying the Buddha; the particular Buddha or Bodhisattva into whose visualisation practice one had been initiated was seen as the Dharma; and the *ḍākinī* – the challenging, inspiring 'sky-dancer' – was seen as representing the Sangha.

The literature of the Vajrayāna is enormous. Most of it consists of instructions for elaborate rituals and meditations. This vast array of different Tantric practices seems to have grown up in an organic, piecemeal manner, but in Tibet they were later systematised into different 'classes' of Tantra, that were theoretically seen as representing progressively more and more advanced stages of practice which the disciple should pass through.

Apart from Tibetan Buddhism, which has a very strong element of Vajrayāna, the main Tantric school still surviving is the Shingon school of Japan.

Decline and Spread

By about 1300CE Buddhism had virtually died out in the land of its birth, partly due to a series of Moslem invasions in which the monasteries and universities were destroyed, and many monks were massacred. But long before Buddhism vanished from India it had already spread in all directions far beyond the Indian subcontinent. It is the schools that survived outside India that now make up the diverse tradition that we call Buddhism.

Some Schools:

Theravāda

The Theravādin school of South-east Asia – the only remaining school that traces itself back to the Sthaviras, or ‘elders’ – is the dominant tradition in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, and Laos. The image of the calm, stately, saffron robed Theravādin monk is an important part of many people’s idea of Buddhism.

The Theravādins largely base their teachings on the Pāli Canon, a set of scriptures in the Pāli language which were written down some time around the first century BCE. By this time these teachings had already been passed down as an oral tradition for several hundred years, and distorted in many ways. Nevertheless parts of the Pāli Canon are still probably as close as we can get to the actual words of the historical Buddha. Some knowledge of the most important suttas (or discourses) of the Pāli Canon is essential for anyone who wants to have an overview of the Buddhist tradition.

As would be expected from a school that traces itself back to the Sthaviras, the Theravada is a conservative tradition – the name Theravada means ‘way of the elders’. Theravādin Buddhists place great emphasis on the historical authenticity of their teachings. They tend to reject the scriptures of other schools as not being based on the words of the Buddha, and to frown on any innovations. Theravada Buddhism puts a heavy emphasis on the monastic life – in the Theravada tradition the word Sangha refers only to monastics.

For those able to lead the monastic life, the Theravada offers a clear, rational, down-to-earth path of practice, with a strong emphasis on mindfulness, renunciation, detachment from worldly concerns, and insight into the transient and unsatisfactory nature of all worldly pleasures, as well as the absence of true self-hood in human beings. Many of the basic practices and teachings used in Triratna derive primarily from the Theravādin tradition – which is not surprising, because Sangharakshita, the founder of the movement, was himself a Theravādin monk for many years.

The Theravādin tradition has however been criticised by Sangharakshita and other writers for emphasising strict adherence to the letter of the teachings at the expense of the spirit behind Buddha's message, for seeing the minor rules of monasticism as ends in themselves, and for downplaying the importance of the warm, positive emotions in the spiritual life, and instead seeing the goal as a form of cold, analytical insight. It has been pointed out that the Buddha in the Pāli Canon frequently stressed the importance of mettā, compassion, and sympathetic joy, but that the Theravādin approach can ignore these aspects of their own canon, or downplay them as being relevant only to the 'lower' path of the layperson.

Mahāyāna Schools – Cha'an and Zen

Cha'an or Zen Buddhism first emerged as a separate school in China, and it may owe its original popularity to a desire to get back to basics, at a time when some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism were indulging in wordy metaphysical speculation or unrealistic flights of fancy about the spiritual life. Cha'an in Chinese and Zen in Japanese are corruptions of the Sanskrit word dhyāna, meaning meditation or meditative states. Hence Zen Buddhism means a Buddhism that emphasises the importance of meditation.

In its traditional form Cha'an/Zen combined long hours of meditation with a challenging monastic regime of daily work, no comforts, no personal space, very basic food, and a fierce no-nonsense style of teaching. Cha'an and Zen practice also involves chanting, ritual, devotional practice, and Dharma talks. Taken together this package adds up to a full frontal assault on the ego's attempt to live according to its likes and dislikes, forcing the practitioner to let go of his self-obsession – or else to be very unhappy.

Two distinct forms of Zen Buddhism evolved, called in Japan 'Rinzai' and 'Soto'. In Rinzai Zen the practitioner meditates on insoluble riddles, called koans, to generate a prolonged and intense sense of questioning, which eventually might lead to a breakthrough into insight. Some of these koans have become famous in Western Buddhist circles – such as, what is the sound of one hand clapping?

Soto Zen emphasises what is usually described as a formless 'Just Sitting' meditation. However the new meditator will usually start off by counting the breath, and even experienced Zen meditators use the breath and the body to anchor the practise in a direct experience of physical reality; so the supposedly formless meditation of Soto Zen actually has much in common with the way an Triratna practitioner might use the Mindfulness of Breathing while on a meditation retreat, when a strict use of the four stages would no longer be necessary.

Japanese Zen was the first Mahāyāna school to become popular in the West. Many Westerners were impressed by the art and poetry inspired by the Zen tradition, which can exude the deep calm of meditation, and the deep appreciation of natural beauty this opens up. In the enthusiasm for Zen in the 1960's and afterwards, Western intellectuals who would never have thought of submitting themselves to the rigorous discipline of a Zen monastery felt moved to write books about Zen,

and an idea of Zen grew up that was based more on projection than fact. But times have moved on, and as the popular enthusiasm for Zen has waned, the number of practising Zen Buddhists in the West has increased. Japanese Zen has now taken its place as one of several Asian forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism present in the West.

Pure Land Schools

Like Zen, Pure Land Buddhism seems to have arisen as a separate approach in China, and then reached its full flowering in Japan, where it is by far the most popular form of Buddhism. Pure Land Buddhism seems to have started by stressing devotion to, mindfulness of, and meditation on, one of the archetypal Buddha's. As such it only differed in emphasis from other forms of Mahāyāna practice, which often include such practices. However the focus of aspiration in Pure Land Buddhism became rebirth in the 'Pure Land' of one or another of the Buddhas – most commonly Amitābha. These Pure Lands were sometimes taken quite literally, as heaven-like realms in which we could be reborn. However many practitioners had a more sophisticated understanding of the Pure Land, seeing it as a metaphor for the Enlightened state, or even as a metaphor for the wonderful reality behind our present experience, which is normally hidden from us by our mental obscurations.

Pure Land Buddhism emphasises faith as the main driving force behind our spiritual progress. This emphasis on faith reached its most extreme form in the 'True Pure Land' school of Japan. In this school we are encouraged to completely entrust ourselves to Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light, in the certain knowledge that we are already 'grasped never to be released' by the compassion of the Absolute. The only practice in this school is to chant 'Homage to Amida Buddha' – 'namu amida butsu' in Japanese – not as a way of staying mindful of the Buddha or invoking his qualities, but simply as an expression of our gratitude for his grace, and for the fact that we are already destined for Enlightenment.

Pure Land Buddhism has not yet achieved much popularity in the West, except among expatriate Asians. For most of us, faith is perhaps not our strong point, and the more intellectually minded will be tempted to dismiss a faith-based approach out of hand. However this might be a mistake. Sangharakshita has pointed out that the 'complete entrusting' of the successful 'True Pure Land' practitioner is equivalent to pure egolessness, and that such faith can be a form of wisdom. At its best, Pure Land doctrine is subtle and spiritually sophisticated.

Nichiren Buddhism

Nichiren Buddhism is the creation of the thirteenth century CE Japanese teacher Nichiren, and has become one of the most widespread forms of Buddhism in the West. Like some other forms of Japanese Buddhism it offers a highly simplified style of practice, which may be part of its appeal. Its main practice is the devotional recitation of 'Homage to the Lotus Sūtra.' Nichiren revered the White Lotus Sūtra as the ultimate truth of Buddhism, and in this school the text is

revered as though it were the Truth itself. Nichiren Buddhism has been criticised because it can seem to have little ethical content, and practitioners may be encouraged to chant as a form of prayer even for quite worldly material ends – caricatured as ‘chanting for a Porsche’. No doubt this is an example of Mahāyāna ‘skilful means’, but, perhaps unfairly, it is an example that has led some writers to ask whether Nichiren Buddhism is in fact Buddhism at all.

Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism is a rich mixture of classical Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, along with elements of native shamanism. At its best it preserves in the purest form still available the style of Buddhism practised in India before the great monastic universities were destroyed by the Moslem invasions. At its worst it degenerates into superstition and black magic. Tibetan Buddhism preserves a huge range of teachings and practices evolved over 1500 years in India, and as a result it is so rich, diverse, and even confused, that it is impossible to sum it up sensibly in a few paragraphs.

Many Tibetan lamas describe their Buddhism as including all three ‘Yānas’, the so-called Hīnayāna, the Mahāyāna, and the Vajrayāna, in a progressive sequence of spiritual development. According to this ideal scheme the disciple first of all goes for refuge to the Three Jewels, then develops disillusionment with samsāra and practices renunciation – equated with the goal of the ‘Hīnayāna’. The disciple then develops a compassionate attitude towards all beings, experiences the arising of the Bodhicitta, and develops an experience of śūnyatā, or ‘emptiness’ – together seen as encompassing the Mahāyāna. On the basis of refuge, renunciation, Bodhicitta, and an experience of śūnyatā, the disciple is then said to begin Vajrayāna practice under the guidance of a guru, using visualisations and mantras to connect with archetypal forms. The disciple would then work their way up through a progressive sequence of supposedly more and more advanced forms of tantric practice – the Nyingma school lists seven, making a total of nine ‘yānas’ the disciple must traverse.

The problem with this ideal scheme is that there are not enough years in a lifetime to complete it, and in practice the earlier stages are skimmed over, although they represent very profound spiritual achievements. (One might ask why, if the Bodhicitta has arisen and if we have a direct experience of śūnyatā – the naked reality behind all phenomena – we would bother to then start working with mantras and visualisation practice.) In fact of course this ideal scheme is not so much a realistic path as an attempt to make sense of all the different historical developments in Buddhism that the Tibetans inherited, by seeing them as progressively more and more advanced stages of practice.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Which would you most like to be, a forest renunciant, a settled monastic, or a lay practitioner? What might be the strengths and dangers of each lifestyle?

2. Temperamentally,
 - a) Would you have sided with the Sthaviras or the Mahāsāṃghikas?
 - b) Which ‘yāna’ appeals to you most?
 - c) Which school or style of Buddhism attracts you most – and least ?
3. How many different styles of Buddhism have you encountered in your reading? Have you had any difficulty in seeing how the different approaches fit together?
4. Do you have any direct experience of traditional Asian styles of Buddhism? If so, tell the group about it.
5. What might be the dangers of thinking that all teachings are ‘skilful means’? What might be the dangers of seeing a teaching as absolute truth?
6. Do you think that the three ‘yānas’ represent progressively more advanced stages of practice? Why, or why not?