

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Two

Module 6: The Bodhisattva Ideal

Introduction

In ‘*Vision and Transformation*’ (one of the other Year Two modules), Sangharakshita explores the Buddhist path through the teachings and practices of what is often called Basic Buddhism. Here he explores the path as conceived by, and practised in, Mahāyāna Buddhism. The two series make a very interesting comparison as they both portray a complete version of the Buddhist path but with a different emphasis and context.

Some of the most important doctrines and practices of Mahāyāna Buddhism are covered here, including:

- The Arising of the Bodhicitta
- The Bodhisattva Vow
- The practice of the Six Perfections (pāramitās)
- The Ten Stages (bhūmis) of the Bodhisattva Path
- The Bodhisattva hierarchy and the Trikāya doctrine

Whilst covering a lot of ground in this series, some of it dealing with advanced stages of the spiritual path, Sangharakshita manages to make it all relevant to our own living of the spiritual life. He does not attempt an historical survey of Mahāyāna Buddhism – if you are interested in that, see the Background Reading section below.

Note

In this series Sangharakshita takes for granted the Indo–Tibetan understanding of the ‘*three yānas*’. However, his thinking on the three yānas has changed since he gave these lectures – he no longer considers them to represent stages in the development of the individual – and it is important that you understand this when you study them. The development of his thinking on the three yānas was covered in *Part 5, Week 3 of the Foundation Year of the Dharma Training Course*.

If you haven’t studied this, please read either that or the source from which it was taken – chapter 2 (‘*The Unity of Buddhism*’) of Subhuti's book ‘*Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*’, especially pages 39-53. If you want to, you could raise this issue for clarification in your first group meeting.

Primary study material

The primary study material for this module – i.e. the core material that it is essential to read before your group meetings – is the series of lectures by Sangharakshita published in book-form as *'The Bodhisattva Ideal'* (Windhorse Publications, ISBN 1899579206) comprising the following lectures

1. The Origin and Development of the Bodhisattva Ideal
2. The Awakening of the Bodhi Heart
3. The Bodhisattva Vow
4. Altruism and Individualism in the Spiritual Life
5. 'Masculinity' and 'Femininity' in the Spiritual Life
6. On the Threshold of Enlightenment
7. The Bodhisattva Hierarchy
8. The Buddha and Bodhisattva: Eternity and Time

'The Bodhisattva Ideal':

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=454>

Mp3 audio recordings of the original lectures are available from *Free Buddhist Audio.com*. If you have the time, I would recommend listening to the lectures – something of Sangharakshita's humour, energy and inspiration come across through listening to him in a way that you just can't get from books.

'Aspects of the Bodhisattva Ideal':

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X09>

Please also be aware that the book contains considerably more material than the lectures as various excerpts from seminars by Sangharakshita have been edited in to it.

Study guide and suggested questions

This module is substantial both in its spiritual scope and in terms of the amount of material that you will need to read (or listen to) each week. So make sure you set some time aside to prepare the material before your group meeting. As usual, it would be helpful if you can take some notes as you work your way through the primary material. This helps both with absorbing the material (avoiding any tendency to 'go in one ear and out the other!') and gives you a summary to refer to in the group and in the future.

The following questions are here to help you engage with the various topics covered in this module. They highlight some of the key themes in each chapter,

and particularly focus on things that aren't raised elsewhere in the course. If you have time, you may wish to write some notes to one or more of the questions before attending your group or you may just wish to reflect on one or two of them through the week. If there is a topic that is not covered by the questions that you wish to discuss in the group then do of course raise that too.

Unit 1 – The Origin and Development of the Bodhisattva Ideal

In this lecture, Sangharakshita introduces his theme and locates the origin of the whole Bodhisattva Ideal within the life of the Buddha himself.

You will need to read the first chapter of the book before your group meeting (or listen to the lecture).

1. What are the distinctive emphases of the Bodhisattva Ideal?
2. *‘Once the Blessed One was staying at Kosambī in the siṅsapā forest. Then, picking up a few siṅsapā leaves with his hand, he asked the monks, “What do you think, monks: Which are more numerous, the few siṅsapā leaves in my hand or those overhead in the siṅsapā forest?” “The leaves in the hand of the Blessed One are few in number, lord. Those overhead in the siṅsapā forest are more numerous.” “In the same way, monks, those things that I have known with direct knowledge but have not taught are far more numerous [than what I have taught]. And why haven't I taught them? Because they are not connected with the goal, do not relate to the rudiments of the holy life, and do not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding. That is why I have not taught them.”’ (S.N. 56.31)*

Reflect on the significance of this story of the siṅsapā leaves.

3. In what ways can the Bodhisattva be described as ‘the ideal Buddhist’?
4. Which do you connect with more – the teaching of the Buddha or his life and example?
5. ‘The point is that one needs to be open to whatever the Buddha can give.’ (p.12) How can you achieve this receptivity?
6. What is the Buddha’s attitude to Kisāgotamī? What is your response to this story?
7. Why do you think fearlessness is stressed as an aspect of Enlightenment?
8. What makes a Buddha unique? What does this tell us about Enlightenment?
9. Do you find the Bodhisattva Ideal personally inspiring? If so, in what ways does it inspire you?

Unit 2 – The Awakening of the Bodhi Heart

We have already come across the ‘Bodhi Heart’ – or ‘Bodhicitta’ – in *Part 4, Week 6 of the Foundation Year* whilst Śāntideva’s method of developing it – the Seven Fold Pūjā – has been introduced in *Part 5, Week 7 of the Foundation Year*. Here, though, Sangharakshita places it in a broader context and introduces another traditional way to develop it.

Please read Chapter 2 of the book (or listen to the lecture) before your group meeting.

1. What is the bodhicitta? Can you identify any analogues of it in your own life or the lives of those around you?
2. ‘The bodhicitta is more likely to arise in a spiritual community...’ (p.34). Why might this be?
3. What is the difference between the ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ bodhicitta?
4. Is the point of stream entry and the arising of the bodhicitta the same or different? What is the relationship between the two?
5. ‘If we make sufficiently careful preparations, we can leave the results to look after themselves.’ (p.46). What bearing might this statement have on your own spiritual practice?
6. What is puṇya? Do you think this concept is useful for you or others?
7. What strikes you about Śāntideva's method for developing the bodhicitta?
8. Reflecting on two of Vasubandhu’s four factors, consider why these factors, in particular, might be seen as conducive to the arising of the bodhicitta.

Unit 3 – The Bodhisattva Vow

In this lecture, Sangharakshita explores the importance of taking vows in spiritual life and goes on to look at the four great vows of the Bodhisattva which are an important part of Far Eastern Buddhism.

Please read Chapter 3 of the book (or listen to the lecture) before your group meeting.

1. What is a vow and what might be the value of making one? (You may want to reflect on any personal experience of vow-taking.)

2. Can we take the Bodhisattva vow literally? How might you explain your position on this to someone else?
3. Sangharakshita talks about helping others in practical ways. What can you do to help others in such ways?
4. ‘In the long run the key to mental health is not psychological but spiritual.’ (p.75) What are the implications of this statement?
5. ‘One can’t do anything with or for other people without at least a touch of the Bodhisattva ideal to keep one going. Otherwise, there will be a reaction sooner or later.’ (p.73) What might be the implications of this statement for your own attempts to practice altruism?
6. How do the meditative antidotes to the five poisons fit with Sangharakshita’s system of meditation (explored in Part Four, Week Two of the Foundation Year)?
7. The six element practice is considered an antidote to conceit. Is there anything in your own spiritual practice that has a similar effect?
8. The third great vow of the Bodhisattva is ‘May I master all dharmas.’ What does this mean?

Unit 4 – Altruism and Individualism in the Spiritual Life

Looking at the practice of the Bodhisattva as the resolution of various opposites, Sangharakshita here begins his exploration of the six pāramitās by contrasting generosity and ethics – dāna and śīla. He takes a different approach to his exploration of ethics than you might expect.

Please read Chapter 4 of the book (or listen to the lecture) before your group meeting.

1. Why did Mahāyāna Buddhists consider it necessary to emphasise the altruistic dimension of the spiritual life?
2. Give a brief account of where your best interest seemed to conflict with someone else’s. Were you able to transcend this conflict?
3. Why is dāna the first perfection? Reflect on your own practice of dāna. How might you intensify it?
4. How do dāna and śīla constitute a pair?
5. Sangharakshita says it is important to establish contact with our pre-Christian past. Do you share this view? Explain your answer.

6. Do you believe that Christian ethics have affected your own ethical life? Do they continue to do so?
7. How might conventional and natural morality be distinguished? Why is this distinction important?
8. What are your own habits and attitudes towards eating?
9. What would the purpose of marriage be in Buddhism? Does this have any relevance to your situation?

Unit 5 – ‘Masculinity’ and ‘Femininity’ in the Spiritual Life

Continuing his exploration of the resolution of opposites, Sangharakshita takes a slightly unusual approach to the pāramitās of kṣānti and vīrya.

Please read Chapter 5 of the book (or listen to the lecture) before your group meeting.

1. What do you think Śāntideva is getting at when he says ‘...he brings the stick, but you bring the body...’ (p.123)?
2. ‘Forbearance is the greatest asceticism.’ What exactly does this mean?
3. ‘To engage in politics or business is simply laziness...’ (Gampopa, p.134). What do you make of this statement?
4. What is tolerance? How does it differ from pseudo-egalitarianism?
5. What is ‘spiritual receptivity’? How are you working to develop this in your practice?
6. Sangharakshita mentions both the role of prayer (p.132) and the influence of grace waves (p.142) in this chapter. What do you make of these terms? And do they have any relevance for your practice of the Dharma?
7. On pp 135 – 137, Sangharakshita suggests ways of working to engage our energies with spiritual practice. Are any of his suggestions relevant to you?
8. ‘The bodhisattva can be described as psychologically and spiritually bisexual, integrating the masculine and the feminine at every level of his or her psychological and spiritual experience.’ (p.144) What do you think Sangharakshita means by this?

Unit 6 – On the Threshold of Enlightenment

Looking at the last two of the pāramitās – dhyāna and prajñā – Sangharakshita concludes his exploration of these various pairs of opposites.

Please read Chapter 6 of the book (or listen to the lecture) before your group meeting.

1. ‘One can't separate meditation and clear thinking’ (p.149). Do these two things go hand-in-hand in your own experience?
2. How can images and symbols communicate Enlightenment? Illustrate your answer with an example of significance to you.
3. In what ways might practising ‘more and more of less and less’ (p.150) be of benefit to you?
4. ‘Sometimes one has to stop, not do anything, and allow one’s real desires, skilful or unskilful, to surface.’ (p.154) What might be the relevance of this statement for you?
5. Have you had experience of dhyāna? If not, what do you think holds you back from such experience?
6. Are there any practical ways you could explore the three gateways to liberation?
7. What is the difference between prajñā and knowledge?
8. Do any of the five wisdoms particularly strike you? If so, why do you think that is?

Unit 7 – The Bodhisattva Hierarchy

After exploring the importance of spiritual hierarchy, Sangharakshita goes on to look at the different kinds of Bodhisattvas and introduces some of the best-known of these archetypal figures.

Please read Chapter 7 of the book (or listen to the lecture) before your group meeting.

1. Why do you think the Buddha felt the impulse to reverence someone or something even after his Enlightenment experience?
2. ‘In fact, the spiritual life itself is inseparable from the hierarchical principle.’ (p.172) Do you agree with this statement? If not, why not?

3. Can the principle of spiritual hierarchy be reconciled with contemporary notions of 'equality'?
4. What is the value of kalyāṇa mitras? If possible, draw examples from your own experience.
5. 'To put oneself in the position of serving someone is to acknowledge that the person one is serving is better than oneself in some respects. It is this that many people are unwilling to do.' (p.177) Have you ever been in the position of serving others? If so, what has been your experience of this?
6. 'Anyone who has tried to live a spiritual life knows how difficult it is to make even a little progress.' (p.184) Why is it so difficult? Answers from personal experience!
7. In the context of the bodhisattva path, what is meant by 'irreversibility' and how is it achieved?
8. Reflect on your responses to one of the bodhisattva figures e.g. Tārā. What is their significance for you?

Unit 8 – The Buddha and Bodhisattva: Eternity and Time

In this lecture, we are approaching the furthest reaches of spiritual life which it can be difficult to imagine or think about. So don't worry if you find this difficult to engage with!

Please read Chapter 8 of the book (or listen to the lecture) before your group meeting.

1. What does it mean to say that the path and goal are discontinuous? (p.202)
2. Identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of the 'path' and of 'deepening one's present experience' as metaphors for spiritual life.
3. 'When you come to a point outside time, as it were, you realise that you have been there all the time. So when you have gained Enlightenment, you realise that you always were Enlightened.' (p.205) What do you think this means?
4. How and why did the Trikāya doctrine develop?
5. 'The Buddha is reality' (p.211) What are the implications of this statement?
6. In what way does the bodhisattva symbolise the 'evolutionary urge'?

7. Reflect on your own preferred model/metaphor for spiritual life. How does it compare with the models presented in this unit?

Projects

As with all the modules of the Dharma Training Course, this module concludes with the opportunity to present a project to your group on a topic arising from the material you have been studying. You may wish to take one of the Suggested Questions and explore it in more detail than you have been able to in the weekly meetings or you may want to take up a theme or question of your own. Whichever you choose, the purpose of the projects is to give you the opportunity to practise the second level of wisdom more fully i.e. the level of reflection or *cintā-mayī-prajñā*. It is also a good way to share something of your experience with the group.

Taking it Further

If you have felt inspired or moved to explore any of the themes in this series further, you may find the following resources helpful. They may also be helpful for your project.

Background reading for the whole series

- ‘*Mahāyāna Buddhism*’ by Paul Williams (Routledge, ISBN 780415356534):

<http://tinyurl.com/64fztmq>

This is one of the best surveys of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Chapters 9 and 10 particularly look at the Bodhisattva Path and some of the more important Bodhisattva figures.

- ‘*Wisdom Beyond Words*’ by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications, ISBN 0904766772):

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=495>

This particularly explores the Perfection of Wisdom teachings so central to Mahāyāna Buddhism.

- ‘*The Bodhicaryāvatāra*’ by Śāntideva, Trans. Crosby and Skilton (Windhorse Publications, ISBN 1899579494):

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=503>

The source of the Sevenfold Pūjā, the title of this famous text is most often translated as 'A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life'. It includes very good chapters on the perfections of kṣānti, vīrya and samādhi (and a not very easy one on prajñā!).

- ‘*A Survey of Buddhism*’ by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications, ISBN 0904766934):

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=331>

Chapter 2 explores the transition from the Hīnayāna the Mahāyāna whilst chapter 3 looks at some of the different schools of the Mahāyāna. Chapter 4 explores the Bodhisattva Ideal in some depth.

- ‘*A Concise History of Buddhism*’ by Andrew Skilton (Windhorse Publications, ISBN 0904766926):

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=330>

Chapters 11 to 13 are very good on the historical origins of the Mahāyāna.

Supplementary resources for each unit

Unit 1

- *For the complete version of the ‘Siṅṣapā Leaves’ story see ‘Access to Insight’:*

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.031.than.html>

- *For a detailed re-telling of the ‘Kisāgotamī’ story, see chapter 2 of ‘Tales of Freedom by Vessantara’ (Windhorse Publications, ISBN 189957927):*

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=343>

Unit 2

- *A translation of Vasubandhu’s ‘Bodhicittotpāda-sūtra-śāstra’ by Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton can be found in volume 4 of the ‘Western Buddhist Review’:*

http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol4/giving_rise_to_the_bodhicitta.html

Unit 7

- *‘Who is the Buddha?’ by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications, ISBN 1899579516):*

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=322>

Chapter 5 explores more fully the incident of the Buddha worshipping the Dharma.

- *‘Meeting the Buddhas’ by Vessantara (Windhorse Publications, ISBN 0904766535) is a very good resource for information on the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas:*

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=335>

Unit 8

- *‘Enlightenment as Experience and as non-Experience’ by Sangharakshita, available in audio from Free Buddhist Audio.com or published in ‘The Taste of Freedom’ (Windhorse Publications, ISBN 090476690X):*

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=119> (audio)

<http://www.sangharakshita.org/bookshelf/taste-freedom.pdf> (e-book)

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=465>
(book)

- *'The Bodhisattva Principle' by Sangharakshita, from 'The Priceless Jewel' (ISBN 0904766586 Windhorse Publications):*

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=353>

This places the Bodhisattva Ideal in the wider context of what Sangharakshita has called the 'Higher Evolution'.

- *An audio version of 'The Bodhisattva Principle' is available here:*

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=159>