1.1
Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels
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Introduction
The main aim of this course is to help people to improve their lives and mental states, rather than to give information about Buddhism for intellectual interest. But to practice the Dharma we need to know the Dharma, and Buddhist ideas have a transformative effect in their own right, by changing the way we see the world, and therefore the way we feel and act.

So this course will have a large element of reading texts, reflecting on texts, and talking about texts. But it is important that we do not approach this with our usual attitudes to what we call ‘study’, which can bring in a sense of competitiveness or inferiority, or engage just our critical, rational intellect, rather than our whole being.

The following text, based on a talk by Padmavajra, offers a more creative way of relating to what we sometimes call ‘study’ – seeing it as ‘talking the Dharma’, an essential and time-honoured spiritual practice that gives inspiration, develops wisdom, creates spiritual community, and gives us a context in which we can work on our habitual ways of being.

Talking the Dharma
Based on the talk Talking the Dharma, Padmavajra, with extra material.

For the early Buddhists ‘talking the Dharma’ – Dharma-kathā – was an important practice. Dharma-kathā means talking about the Dharma, conversing on the basis of the Dharma, relating through the Dharma. It means using the ideas, the ideals, the formulations, and the symbols of the Dharma as the medium for communication.

In the Meghiya Sutta, the Buddha describes Dharma-kathā as one of the five things – along with meditation - that, ‘when the Heart’s Release is immature, conduce to its maturity.’ Talking the Dharma is as important as meditation. It is not an optional extra.

At this point someone will usually object that experiencing the truth in Buddhism is supposed to be about getting beyond words and concepts. But ‘invoking the wordless’ prematurely will not liberate us on its own. Before we ‘invoke the wordless’ we need to free ourselves from the tangle of imprisoning concepts and world-views we have already taken on without knowing it. We gradually replace these unconscious views with ideas we have consciously chosen, which are liberating and help us live a spiritually vital life. Only when we have done this can we go beyond concepts altogether. If we ‘invoke the wordless’ too early, before we have gone through this process, we will simply remain imprisoned in the net of unconscious views we have picked up from our family, friends, education, society and so on. To quote The Awakening
of Faith in the Mahayana, ‘We use words to get free from words, until we reach the pure wordless Essence’.

Exposure to the Dharma is transformative
When we study a text that originates from the mind of someone more spiritually developed than ourselves we enter their mind - we enter a higher world. In a study group we can spend some time with our spiritual friends living in this higher world, helping each other to experience it as fully as possible. This exposure to a higher world is a transformative experience. It can put us in higher states as surely as any meditation practice. It can even lead us directly to Insight. In the Pali Canon¹ there are more cases of people breaking through to a new level as the result of exposure to the Dharma than as the result of meditation! (Later examples include Hui Neng and Sangharakshita, both of whom experienced Insight as a result of exposure to the Diamond Sūtra).

To benefit from this transformative effect of the Dharma we need to approach it in the right way. We need to remember that we are entering another higher world, and to be open to the atmosphere and magic, rather than simply focusing on the concepts.

We also need to approach with an attitude of respect, acknowledging that the text originates from a being who is more developed than ourselves. If we dislike aspects of what is being said we need to be open to the possibility that our reactions may say more about us than they do about Reality. This doesn’t mean we must agree slavishly, but we need to keep an open mind, and be willing to try out unfamiliar ways of looking at the world. To approach a text in this way is an insight practice in its own right. Often our views are more connected with conditioning than with in-depth reflection. If we don’t like an idea it can be very helpful to ask ourselves why this is. If we are honest the real answer may be “because I think of myself as such and such a sort of person”, “because all my education emphasised a different view”, “because everyone else in the circles I move in thinks differently”, or “because if I really took this on I would have to change in ways I am not yet ready to do.” Becoming honest with ourselves in this way is a step to freeing ourselves from our fixed self view, an important aspect of Insight.

Dharma study gives inspiration
When we immerse ourselves in a Dharma text we enter the world of a more developed mind. We enter a higher world, and visiting a higher world is inspiring, if also challenging! We can make study more inspiring for ourselves and others by preparing a few points we want to bring out in the group. These could be points from the text we find particularly inspiring or eye-opening, things from our experience that illustrate what is being talked about, or ways the text could help us practice. Thinking of these before the meeting is an act of generosity towards the group, and if everyone prepares in this way the study will be lively and inspiring.

Dharma study is the way we develop wisdom
Traditionally there are three steps to developing Wisdom:

- Śruta-mayī-prajñā, Wisdom which comes from hearing and learning.
- Cinta-mayī-prajñā, Wisdom which comes from thinking and reflecting.
- Bhāvanā-mayī-prajñā, Wisdom which comes from meditative development.

¹ The Pali Canon is the collected record of the Buddha’s discourses and the rules of monastic life recorded in the Pali language, which forms the basis for the teachings of the Theravada School of South-east Asia.
The last of these is ‘real’ Wisdom, but for just about all normal beings the others are essential steps, without which the last wisdom never happens.

Śruta-mayī-prajñā
We need to hear and learn the basic teachings. As practising Buddhists we need to know the basic formulations off by heart – the precepts, the hindrances, the levels of Going for Refuge, the levels of wisdom, and so on. When we know these things off by heart they become a part of our thinking, and part of the way we live in the world. This is the most basic function of study.

To develop this level of wisdom we need first of all to be clear about what the study text is saying, independent of our reactions to it. To do this we will normally need to make notes, simplifying down to the main points and the main Dharmic formulations. This will allow us to go into the study group confident that we know the important points, and able to give a summary for the rest of the group if asked.

Some people who have had an unfortunate experience of formal education have difficulty with this process. This is an area where members of the Sangha can help each other. If the process of reading and note-taking is difficult, it is very helpful to go through the text with someone else, picking out the main points, as a way of overcoming lack of confidence or experience in this area.

Cintā-mayī-prajñā
This level of wisdom arises from thinking and reflecting. This includes reflecting on the Dharma on our own, but discussing a text with other Buddhists is also an effective way of developing this level of wisdom - for most people it is an essential part of the process. We get the benefit of many different temperaments, many different life-experiences, many different imaginations, and so we see what is being talked about from many different angles. It can also be easier to maintain a high level of interest and energy in a discussion than when reflecting on one’s own. We can all contribute to this process of exploration by coming armed with some main points we want to emphasise, as suggested earlier.

Bhāvanā-mayī-prajñā
Sometimes a Dharma study group will seem to take off into magical territory – a joint exploration of the Truth, where ego is forgotten, where we seem to be one mind with many bodies, and where we get an idea of the living, life-changing spiritual truth behind the words of the teachings. This is bordering on bhāvanā-mayī-prajñā. Usually we need the clarity and focus of meditation to develop this level of wisdom in its fullness, but when this does come about it is usually as the result of a deep experience of the previous levels: we know the Dharma at the intellectual level, we have reflected on it deeply, it has become part of our thinking, it has seeped into our bones. Then when we meditate on it, it transmutes us into another being entirely.

Dharma study helps us develop Sangha
Dharma study is an opportunity to relate to other Buddhists in a Dharmic context, which reminds us to relate on the basis of our highest selves – relating from our own highest self, to the highest self of the other. This relating to one another on the basis of what is highest within us is one definition of Sangha. An important aim of a study group is to create a mini-Sangha on this basis. Talking with others about the Dharma is often more helpful in this respect than talking about football, politics, everyday events, or our personal problems, all of which tend to bring up the old normal lower self we present in the everyday world.
Study groups are ways to work on ourselves
What usually gets in the way of developing Sangha in any group situation is our conditioned reactivity, and the fact that other people ‘push our buttons’. A Dharma study group is an excellent place to work on this, because it is safe, supportive, challenging, and constantly reminds us that our reactions are there to be transcended, not indulged. Building Sangha is an exercise in self-awareness and self-transcendence.

Study pushes buttons, and groups of people push us into habitual roles. We need to focus as much on how we are in the group – especially the effect we have on others - as on the ideas being discussed.

Possible reactions in the study situation include competitiveness, argumentativeness, shyness, withdrawal, anger at unfamiliar ideas, and so on.

Possible roles include rebel, wannabee leader, good boy or girl, devil’s advocate, superior observer, know-all, show-off, cynic, and joker.

We need to ask ourselves, what are our habitual reactions and roles in the group? We need to find ways to stay ’in the gap’ with regard to these. And we need to look for more creative ways of being in the group that create harmony and a sense of shared inspiration. If we treat it in this way, being part of the study group becomes an exercise in mindfulness, mettā, communication, and transcending our old habitual ways of being - it becomes a powerful way of practising the Dharma in its own right.
Introduction
When we become a Mitra we assert that:

- I think of myself as a Buddhist.
- I am trying to practice the Five Precepts.
- The Triratna Buddhist Community is the main context in which I want to practice, at least for the foreseeable future.

Part 1, Year One of this course is intended to help us explore the first of these declarations, giving us a better understanding of what it means to be a Buddhist.

But as soon as we ask what it means to be a Buddhist we run into a difficulty. In traditional Buddhism there is no word equivalent to our word ‘Buddhist’. For us in the West, to become an ‘ist’ of any sort usually means that we have accepted a set of ideas and beliefs. But Buddhism is not really an ‘ism’ in this sense. Buddhism is not so much a ‘faith’ as a path of practice. So to ‘be a Buddhist’ does not mean that we have signed up to a set of beliefs. It is more likely to mean that Buddhism has influenced the way we live, or that we are committed to Buddhist practices, or that we resonate with Buddhist ideas, or that we feel a link with the other Buddhists we have come across.

At the time of the Buddha the closest anyone got to saying “I am a Buddhist” was to say “I Go for Refuge to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.” But when we first come across it this phrase probably means nothing to us. We need to decode it, and we need to break through the strange-sounding words to the inner experience they stand for. This is an experience you will already have had to some extent, otherwise you would not be taking part in this course. It is an experience that leads to a shift in our world-view, a shift in what we place our heart on, and a shift in how we act.

So the first part of this course aims to decode this phrase ‘Going for Refuge to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.’ It aims to help us relate it to our own experience, partly to get a clearer idea of what it means to be a Buddhist, and more importantly to deepen and strengthen the experience it refers to.

In the following excerpt from his talks, Sangharakshita gives a brief introduction to the meaning of Going for Refuge to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. In doing so he rather mischievously uses the term ‘conversion’. For some people this word will have unwelcome ‘religious’ echoes, but we need to set these aside and focus on its real meaning - the ‘turning around’ that leads us to shift our priorities in life. In this text Sangharakshita talks about ‘going for refuge’ to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as an intense experience that leads us to
completely re-orientate our life. You may not experience such a deep sense of commitment, but this does not mean that you are not ‘going for refuge’ at some level, or that you cannot be a Buddhist. The experience of going for refuge occurs at a number of different levels, and a less intense commitment is also a valid and valuable experience. But you may find it useful to hear about what ‘going for refuge’ to the Three Jewels can be like in its fullness, and to reflect on the revolutionary, liberating effect such a commitment would have.

The Meaning of ‘Going for Refuge’

Text composed of combined extracts from lectures: Going for Refuge; Commitment and the Spiritual Community; Dimensions of Going for Refuge; and Levels of Going for Refuge, all by Sangharakshita.

‘Conversion’ in Buddhism

‘Conversion’ in the spiritual sense may popularly be thought to be the turning from heathenish ways to the light of the ‘true faith’, but it also has a much higher and more valuable meaning. The general meaning of the word conversion is clear enough: any dictionary will tell us that it means simply ‘turning around’. And when one turns around, this involves a double movement: a movement away from something and also a movement towards something. ‘Conversion’ means a turning from a lower to a higher way of life, from a worldly to a spiritual life. Conversion in this sense is often spoken of as a change of heart.

One of the most notable examples of a sudden ‘turning around’ is the case of the robber Angulimāla, who changed in the course of a few days from a murderous thief into an emancipated being. But while some people have these instantaneous experiences, conversion can come about in a much more gradual way. There may be a ‘moment of conversion’, the experience may be sudden, even catastrophic, but then it dawns on you that actually your whole life has been building up to that moment over many years.

But however it comes to us, over a period of years or in a matter of seconds, the experience of conversion is of the greatest possible importance, because it marks the beginning of our spiritual life. The meaning of conversion therefore deserves our closest attention.

‘Going for Refuge’

Going for Refuge is the simplest aspect of conversion in Buddhism. So what is Going for Refuge? Although the term is so widely used, it can be rather mystifying when you first come across it. What does one mean by ‘Refuge’? And who or what does one ‘Go for Refuge’ to? The short answer is that as a practising Buddhist one Goes for Refuge to the Buddha, the enlightened teacher; to the Dharma, or his teaching of the path leading to Enlightenment; and to the Sangha, the community of those progressing along that path in the direction of Enlightenment. These three Refuges are commonly known as the Three Jewels.

The meaning of ‘refuge’

To begin with, what is meant by ‘refuge’? Refuge from what? The traditional explanations are quite clear on this point: the Three Jewels are a refuge from suffering. It is the existence of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha that makes it possible for us to escape from the unsatisfactoriness, the transitoriness, the conditioned-ness, the ‘unreality’ of the world as we experience it.

The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha are called the Three Jewels because they represent the world of the highest spiritual values. The fact that those values exist gives us the possibility of development, evolution, and progress far beyond our present comparatively low
level. Considered as refuges, the Three Jewels represent the possibility of complete liberation from suffering.

It is no linguistic accident that we speak of going for refuge. You don’t just accept the Three Refuges; you go for refuge. This action is a total, unqualified reorientation of your life, your existence, your striving, in the direction of the Three Jewels. When you say ‘I Go for Refuge’ you are not only acknowledging that the Three Jewels are the most supremely valuable things in existence; you are also acting upon that acknowledgement. You see that the Three Jewels provide a possibility of escape into a higher spiritual dimension, and so you go – you completely redirect and reorganize your life in the light of that realization.

‘Going for Refuge’ at the time of the Buddha
Sometimes, when reading the Buddhist scriptures, we get the impression that the Dharma is a matter of lists. But it certainly wasn't like that at the beginning. It was all fresh, all original, all creative. The Buddha would speak from the depths of his spiritual experience. He would expound the Truth. He would show the Way leading to Enlightenment, and the person to whom he was speaking would be absolutely astounded and overwhelmed. In some cases he might not be able to speak or to do more than stammer a few incoherent words. Something had been revealed to him. Something had burst upon him that was above and beyond his ordinary understanding. For an instant, at least, he had glimpsed the Truth, and the experience had staggered him. Time and again, on occasions of this sort, the scriptures tell us that the person concerned exclaimed,

Excellent, Lord, excellent! As if one should set up again that which had been overthrown, or reveal that which had been hidden, or should disclose the road to someone that was astray, or should carry a lamp into darkness, saying, "They that have eyes will see!" even so has the Truth been manifested by the Exalted One in many ways.

He or she would feel deeply affected, deeply moved, deeply stirred, and sometimes there were external manifestations of this. Their hair might stand on end, they might even shed tears, or they might be seized by a violent fit of trembling. They would have a tremendous experience, an experience of illumination. They would have a tremendous sense of freedom, of emancipation, as though a great burden had been lifted from their back, or as though they’d been just suddenly let out of prison or as though they could at last see their way. The questioner, the listener, would feel spiritually reborn, would feel like a new man or woman.

Then, out of the depth of his gratitude, such a person would fervently exclaim,

To the Buddha for refuge I go! To the Dharma for refuge I go! To the Sangha for refuge I go!

We can now see not only where the Going for Refuge had its origin, but also something of its tremendous spiritual significance. It is the heartfelt response of one’s total being to the impact of the truth, the impact of Reality. One commits oneself to the truth, one surrenders to the truth, one wants to devote one’s whole life to the truth.

The Going for Refuge represents our positive emotional reaction – in fact our total response – to the spiritual ideal when that ideal is revealed to our spiritual vision. Such is its appeal that we cannot but give ourselves to it. As Tennyson says, ‘We needs must love the Highest when we see it.’ Going for Refuge is a bit like that. You’ve seen the ‘Highest’, therefore you needs
must love it, needs must give yourself to it, needs must commit yourself to it. That commitment of yourself to the ‘Highest’ is the Going for Refuge. The person would commit himself, because the vision that the Buddha had shown him, the vision of truth, the vision of existence, was so great that all he could do was give himself to that vision, completely. He would want to live for that vision.

And this was how one could know who was a Buddhist, this was the criterion: a Buddhist was one who goes for refuge in that sort of way as his response to the Buddha and his teaching. A Buddhist was one who commits himself, gives himself, if you like, to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. So this was the criterion in the Buddha’s day two thousand five hundred years ago, and it remains the criterion today.

Now the object of refuge is threefold. One goes for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. What then do these three things mean? We can understand in a general way this feeling of committing oneself to the ‘Highest’, but what does it mean to go for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha specifically?

**The Buddha**
The Buddha is an Enlightened human being. He is not God, nor an Avatar or messenger of God. He is a human being who, by his own efforts, has reached the summit of human perfection. He has gained the ineffable state which we designate Enlightenment, Nirvana, or Buddhahood. When we go for refuge to the Buddha, we go for Refuge to the Buddha in this sense. Not that we just admire him from a distance. Great as the gap between the Buddha and ourselves may be, that gap can be closed. We can close it by following the path, by practising the Dharma. We too can become as the Buddha. We too can become Enlightened. That is the great message of Buddhism. Each and every human being who makes the effort can become even as the Buddha became.

When, therefore, we go for refuge to the Buddha, we go for refuge to him as the living embodiment of a spiritual ideal that we can actually realise. When we go for refuge to the Buddha it is as though we say, ‘That is what I want to be. That is what I want to attain. I want to be Enlightened. I want to develop the fullness of wisdom, the fullness of compassion.’ Going for Refuge to the Buddha means taking the Buddha – taking Buddhahood – as our personal spiritual ideal, as something we ourselves can achieve.

**The Dharma**
The Dharma is the Path or Way. It is the path of what I have sometimes called the higher evolution of man, a stage of purely spiritual development above and beyond ordinary biological evolution. As a path, the Dharma exists in a number of different formulations. We speak of the Threefold Path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom, as well as the path of the Six Perfections of giving, morality, patient forbearance, vigour, higher consciousness, and wisdom – the Path of the Bodhisattva.

There are many different formulations, but the basic principle of the path is the same. The path is essentially the path of the higher evolution. It is whatever helps us to develop. The Dharma, or the path, is not to be identified with this or that particular teaching. According to the Buddha’s own express declaration, the Dharma is whatever contributes to the spiritual development of the individual. When we go for refuge to the Dharma we therefore commit ourselves to whatever helps us develop spiritually – to whatever helps us to grow into Enlightenment, into Buddhahood.
This clear understanding is necessary, but not sufficient. Going for refuge to the Dharma means not just understanding the doctrines, but also the actual practice of the Dharma, through observance of Buddhist ethics, through meditation, and through the cultivation of transcendental wisdom.

**The Sangha**

Sangha means ‘Spiritual Community’. Firstly this is the community of all those who are spiritually more advanced than we are: the great Bodhisattvas, the Arahants, the Stream Entrants, and so on. Together they form the Aryasangha, or the Spiritual Community in the highest sense. Secondly, it is the community of all Buddhists, all those who go for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. In the case of the Aryasangha, going for refuge to the Sangha means opening ourselves to the spiritual influence of the sublime beings of whom it consists. It means learning from them, being inspired by them, reverencing them. In the case of the Sangha in the more ordinary sense – that of the community of all Buddhists – it means enjoying spiritual fellowship with one another and helping one another on the path. Sometimes you may not need a highly advanced Bodhisattva to help you. All you need is an ordinary human being who is a little more developed spiritually than you are, or even just a little bit more sensible. Only too often people are on the lookout for a great guru, but that is not what they really need, even if such a person was available. What they need is a helping hand where they are now, on the particular stage of the path which at present they occupy, and this an ordinary fellow Buddhist can generally give.

Of course the Sangha Refuge cannot really be understood in isolation from the context of the Three Jewels. Those who go for refuge to the Sangha necessarily go for refuge to the Buddha and Dharma. Before you can effectively go for refuge to the Sangha, you and all the other people who form the Sangha need to have a common spiritual ideal. It is this that draws them together.

But coming together in a kind of congregation is not enough to form a Sangha. We may all agree on doctrinal issues and even have the same meditation experiences, but this does not make us a Sangha. Sangha is a matter of communication – communication on the basis of spiritual ideals. If we find our contacts with people at work and at parties a bit meaningless, it is because we are not communicating on the basis of spiritual ideals. We could define the sort of communication that happens in a Sangha as ‘a vital mutual responsiveness on the basis of a common ideal and a shared principle’. This is communication in the context of Going for Refuge – a shared exploration of the spiritual world, between people who are in a relationship of complete honesty and harmony.

The most generally accepted mode of this communication is between spiritual teacher and disciple, but it is not limited to this. It may also take place between those who are simply friends, or kalyāṇa mitras – good friends in the spiritual sense. Going for refuge to the Sangha takes place when, on the basis of a common devotion to the Buddha and the Dharma, people explore together a spiritual dimension which neither could have explored on their own.

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2 In some forms of Buddhism, most notably the Theravada school of South-east Asia, Sangha is taken to refer exclusively the monks and nuns, and excludes those who live a lay life. In Sangharakshita’s view this gives too much importance to a matter of lifestyle, and not enough to the commitment that makes a person a Buddhist. In Triratna we therefore use the word ‘Sangha’ to mean all seriously practising members of the Buddhist community, regardless of whether they live the life of a monastic, a householder, or a solitary practitioner.
Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What does “being a Buddhist” mean to you? Can you relate this to the commitment to Buddha, Dharma or Sangha that Sangharakshita describes?

2. What the process that led you to Buddhism sudden or gradual? What steps did it involve?

3. What do your non-Buddhist friends ‘go for refuge’ to? What do you ‘go for refuge’ to, apart from the Three Jewels?

4. Which of the Three Jewels do you relate to most strongly?

5. In what ways have you “redirected and reorganised your life” since becoming a Buddhist? Are there any ways you would like to redirect your life that you haven’t got round to yet?
Introduction
The first of the Buddhist refuges is the Buddha himself. In the next four parts of this course we will be looking at the figure of the Buddha, and exploring what it might mean to ‘Go for Refuge to the Buddha’ – seeking to break through the strange and maybe alien words to the experience they point to.

The Buddha’s importance does not lie in who he was, it lies in what he was. ‘Buddha’ is not a name, it is a title, meaning something like ‘he who is awake’. The Buddha’s importance to Buddhists comes from the fact that he woke up - he reached the state which we call Enlightenment. The Buddha is one who woke up out of the sleep-like state in which we exist to a true experience of reality.

In the following text Sangharakshita explains something of the meaning of the term ‘Enlightenment’, telling us what it was that was so important about the Buddha. In the process he clears up some common misunderstandings about the nature of the Buddha and his place in Buddhism. He also perhaps gives us a clue to how ‘Going for Refuge to the Buddha’ can be a cure for our underlying dukkha – suffering or dissatisfaction – because this means committing ourselves to realising our own spiritual potential, which is the only way to true happiness.

The Ideal of Human Enlightenment
Text condensed from The Ideal of Human Enlightenment, by Sangharakshita.

Even people who do not know anything at all about the teachings of Buddhism will at least have seen an image of the Buddha. What does that image show? It shows a man in the prime of life, well built and handsome. He is seated cross-legged beneath a tree. His eyes are half closed, and there is a smile on his lips. The figure conveys an impression of solidity, stability, and strength. It conveys an impression of absolute calm, absolute repose. But what attracts us most of all is the face, because this conveys something which it is very difficult to put into words. As we look at it, perhaps even concentrate on it, we see that the face is alive, that it is alight, and in that light we see reflected an unfathomable knowledge, a boundless compassion, and an ineffable joy.

This, then, is the figure, the image of the Buddha, the Enlightened One. Usually it represents the historical Gautama the Buddha, the ‘founder’ of Buddhism, the great Indian teacher who lived approximately five hundred years before Christ. But the figure also possesses a wider significance. It represents The Ideal of Human Enlightenment.

Human Enlightenment is the central theme of Buddhism. It is what Buddhism is basically concerned with, both theoretically and practically. Indeed, it is what the Buddhist himself is
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basically concerned with. Therefore in this lecture we shall be trying to understand what is meant by Enlightenment in general and, in particular, by ‘Human Enlightenment’. This raises three questions:

1. What is Enlightenment, or Buddhahood?
2. How do we know that this state which we call Enlightenment is the ideal for man?
3. Where does this ideal of Enlightenment come from? Whence does it originate?

What is Enlightenment?
Buddhist tradition speaks of Enlightenment as comprising mainly three things. To begin with, Enlightenment is spoken of as a state of pure, clear, even radiant awareness. Some schools go so far as to say that in this state of awareness the subject/object duality is no longer experienced. There is no ‘out there’, no ‘in here’. That distinction, that subject/object distinction as we usually call it, is entirely transcended. There is only one continuous, pure, clear awareness, extending as it were in all directions, pure and homogeneous. It is, moreover, an awareness of things as they really are, which is, of course, not things in the sense of objects, but things as transcending the duality of subject and object. Hence this pure, clear awareness is also spoken of as an awareness of Reality, and therefore also as a state of knowledge.

This knowledge is not knowledge in the ordinary sense, not the knowledge that functions within the framework of the subject/object duality, but rather a state of direct, unmediated spiritual vision that sees all things directly, clearly, vividly, and truly. It is a spiritual vision, even a Transcendental vision, which is free from all delusion, all misconception, all wrong, crooked thinking, all vagueness, all obscurity, all mental conditioning, all prejudice. First of all, then, Enlightenment is this state of pure, clear awareness, this state of knowledge or vision.

Secondly, Enlightenment is spoken of as a state of intense, profound, overflowing love and compassion. Sometimes this love is compared to the love of a mother for her only child. This comparison occurs, for instance, in a very famous Buddhist text called the Mettā Sutta, the ‘Discourse of Loving Kindness’. In this discourse the Buddha says,

Just as a mother protects her only son even at the cost of her own life, so should one develop a mind of all-embracing love towards all living beings.

This is the sort of feeling, the sort of attitude, that we must cultivate. You notice that the Buddha does not just talk about all human beings, but all living beings: all that is sentient. This is how the Enlightened mind feels. And that love and compassion consists in a heartfelt desire, a deep, burning desire, for their well-being, for their happiness: a desire that all beings should be set free from suffering, from all difficulties, that they should grow and develop, and that ultimately they should gain Enlightenment. Love and compassion of this kind, – infinite, overflowing, boundless, directed towards all living beings – this too is part of Enlightenment.

Thirdly, Enlightenment consists in a state, or experience, of inexhaustible mental and spiritual energy. Energy is characteristic of the state of Enlightenment. The state of Enlightenment is one of tremendous energy, of absolute spontaneity, continually bubbling forth: a state of uninterrupted creativity. The state of Enlightenment is a state of perfect, unconditioned freedom from all subjective limitations.

This, then, is how Enlightenment is usually described. But of course Enlightenment cannot really be put into words or separated into parts. What really happens is that knowledge passes into love and compassion, love and compassion into energy, energy into knowledge, and so on.
We cannot really split any one aspect off from the others. Nonetheless, we are traditionally given this ‘tabulated’ account of Enlightenment, to convey some hint of the experience, to give some little idea, or feeling, of what it is like.

If we want to have a better idea than this, then we shall have to read, perhaps, some more extended, poetic account, preferably one found in the Buddhist scriptures; or we shall have to take up the practice of meditation, and try to get at least a glimpse of the state of Enlightenment as we meditate. So when Buddhism speaks of Enlightenment, of Buddhahood or Nirvana, this is what it means: it means a state of supreme knowledge, love and compassion, and energy.

**How do we know that this state of Enlightenment is the ideal for man?**

Before attempting to answer this question, we shall have to distinguish between two kinds of ideal – ‘natural ideals’ and ‘artificial ideals’. A natural ideal is an ideal which takes into consideration the nature of the thing or the person for which it is an ideal. The artificial ideal, on the other hand, does not do this. The artificial ideal imposes itself from the outside, in an artificial manner.

Using this distinction, we may say that Enlightenment is not an artificial ideal. It is not something imposed on human beings from outside, something that does not belong to us or accord with our nature. Enlightenment is a natural ideal for man, or even the natural ideal. There is nothing artificial about it, nothing arbitrary. It is an ideal that corresponds to our nature and our needs.

We know this in two ways. I have spoken about the nature of Enlightenment, and obviously it has seemed something very rarefied, something remote from our experience. But the qualities that constitute Enlightenment are, in fact, already found in man, in germinal form. They are not completely foreign to us. They are, in a sense, natural to human beings. In every man, in every woman, there is some knowledge, some experience of Reality, however remote and far removed, some feeling of love and compassion, however limited and exclusive, and some energy, however gross and unrefined, however conditioned and unspontaneous. All these qualities are already there, to some extent.

But in the state of Enlightenment, these qualities are fully and perfectly developed, to a degree that we can hardly imagine. It is for this reason, because the qualities of knowledge, love, and energy are already present within us, in however embryonic a form, that we have a natural affinity with Enlightenment, and can respond to the ideal of Enlightenment when we encounter it. Thus even when someone speaks in terms of absolute knowledge, of the vision of Reality, or in terms of boundless, unlimited love and compassion for all living beings, it is not something completely foreign to us, it is not just so many words. We can feel something. And this is because the germ, the seed, is already there, in our own experience, and we can respond to the ideal of Enlightenment whenever and however we encounter it, even when we encounter it in comparatively weak, limited, or distorted forms.

We also know that Enlightenment is the natural ideal for human beings because, in the long run, we are never really satisfied by anything else. We can have all sorts of pleasures, all sorts of achievements, but eventually we still feel within ourselves something not satisfied. This is what in Buddhism is called dukkha: unsatisfactoriness, or even suffering.

Tradition speaks of three forms of dukkha. The first is called simply, ‘the suffering which is suffering’. It is obviously suffering if we cut our finger, or when someone upsets us or
disappoints us, for instance. This is the kind of suffering that is, simply, suffering. Then there is what is called ‘suffering by way of transformation’. We have something, we enjoy it, we get a great deal of pleasure from it, but by its very nature that thing cannot last. And because we have enjoyed it and become attached to it, suffering results. This is the suffering that comes about as a result of change, of time. Then there is ‘the suffering of conditioned existence itself’: the suffering, ultimately, of everything which is not Enlightenment. Even if we do acquire things, and even if we go on possessing them and enjoying them, there is still some corner of our heart which is not satisfied, which wants something more, something further, something greater. And this something is what we call Enlightenment.

So from this too we know that Enlightenment is the natural ideal for man, because man ultimately is not satisfied with anything less. Personifying the ideal of Enlightenment, and borrowing the theistic language of St. Augustine, we may say, ‘Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee.’

**Where does the ideal of Enlightenment come from?**
The ideal comes from human life itself; it comes from human history. It could not come from any other source. The ideal for man, we may say, can only come from a human being. And if we look back into history we can see various people who have actually achieved Enlightenment, who have closed the gap between the real and the ideal. If we look back in history we can see individuals who are living embodiments of the ideal.

In particular, we see the figure of the young Indian patrician who, some 2500 years ago, gained Enlightenment or, as the Buddhist scriptures call it, Bodhi, which is ‘knowledge’, or ‘awakening’. He it was who, after gaining that state of Enlightenment, inaugurated the great spiritual revolution, the great spiritual tradition, that we now call Buddhism.

**Misunderstandings**
At this point I would like to clear up certain misunderstandings with regard to the Buddha. At the beginning of this lecture I said that even the non-Buddhist has at least seen an image or picture of the Buddha, and that he might even be quite familiar with it. However, although he might have seen it many times, he may not have a very clear idea of what it represents; he may not know who, or what, the Buddha is.

There are, in fact, on the part of many people, some quite serious misunderstandings about him. There are in particular two major misunderstandings: firstly that the Buddha was an ordinary man, and secondly that the Buddha was God. Both of these misunderstandings are the result of thinking, consciously or unconsciously, in theistic terms, which is to say, in terms of a personal God who has created the universe, and who governs it by his providence.

For orthodox Christianity, God and man are entirely different beings. God is the creator. Man is the created. Man can never become God: such an idea would be meaningless. Orthodox Christians, therefore, when confronted by the figure of the Buddha, classify him as an ordinary man, essentially just like everyone else, even as a sinful man, albeit perhaps better than most people.

The second misunderstanding arises out of the first. You often read in books, even now, that after his death the Buddha’s followers ‘deified’ him, or made him into a God. This is indicated, we are told, by the fact that Buddhists worship the Buddha, and of course worship is due only to God. If you worship someone or something, a Christian will inevitably think that you are treating it, or him, as God.
Now both these misunderstandings can be cleared up quite easily. All that we have to do is to free ourselves from our Christian conditioning, which affects, at least unconsciously, even those who no longer think of themselves as Christians. We have to stop trying to think of the Buddha in what are really non-Buddhist terms.

**A new category**

So who, or what, was the Buddha? How do Buddhists think of him? How did he think of himself? In the first place, the Buddha was a man, a human being. But he was not an ordinary man. He was an Enlightened man: a man who was the living embodiment of perfect knowledge, unbounded love and compassion, and inexhaustible energy. But he was not born an extraordinary man. He became an extraordinary man, as a result of his own human effort to make actual what was potential in himself. So Buddhism recognizes two great categories: the category of the ordinary man, and the category of the Enlightened man.

Although the gulf between these two is not unbridgeable, as is the gulf between God and man in Christianity, the distance between them is very great, and it takes a tremendous effort to traverse this gap. Many Buddhists, in fact, believe that this effort has to be maintained through a whole succession of lives, whether here on earth or in higher realms. For this reason, the Enlightened man is regarded as constituting an independent category of existence. The Enlightened man is regarded as the highest being in the universe, higher even than the gods. For this reason the Enlightened man is worshipped. He is worshipped out of gratitude for setting an example, for showing the way, for showing us what we too are capable of becoming. In other words, the Buddha is worshipped, not as God, but as teacher, as exemplar, as guide.

In this connection, Gautama the Buddha is often referred to as ‘the elder brother of the world’, or ‘elder brother of mankind’, because He has been born, spiritually, first, and we are born, spiritually, afterwards. Sometimes the Buddha is compared to the first chick to emerge from a clutch of eggs. This first-born chick starts to tap on the shells of the other eggs with his little beak, helping the other chicks to emerge. And so, we are told, the Buddha is like that first chick. He is the first to emerge from the shell of ignorance, the shell of spiritual darkness and blindness, and then he taps on our shells, he wakes us up with his Teaching, He helps us to emerge.

From all this we can see that the Buddhist conception of the Enlightened man represents a category for which we have no equivalent in Western religious tradition. He is neither God nor man in the Christian sense. He is not even man-without-God, man left on his own without God. He is something in between and above. Perhaps we can best think of Enlightened man in evolutionary terms. Man is an animal, but he is no ordinary animal. He represents a new category: an animal, but, at the same time, infinitely more than an animal. In the same way, a Buddha is a man, but he is not an ordinary man. He is an Enlightened man. He too represents a new category of existence: a human being, but, at the same time, infinitely more than a human being: an Enlightened human being, a Buddha.

**Conclusion**

Let us conclude, then, as we began, with the figure of Gautama the Buddha. He is seated under the Bodhi tree, just a few weeks after His great awakening. According to one of the oldest accounts, at that time He looked out over the world, over the whole of humanity with His spiritual vision, or what is called His ‘divine eye’.
And as He looked out in this way. He saw mankind as like a great bed of lotus flowers. He saw that some of the flowers were deeply immersed in the mud, while others rose half out of the water. Some were even standing completely clear of the water. In other words, He saw all human beings as being at different stages of growth. And that is how Buddhism has seen humanity ever since: as a bed of plants capable of producing shoots, as shoots capable of producing buds, as buds capable of opening into flowers, into lotus flowers, even into the thousand-petalled lotus itself.

But in order to grow, in order to develop, human beings must have something to grow into. They cannot grow unconsciously, as the plant does: they must grow consciously. In fact for human beings growth means growth in consciousness, growth in awareness. This is why man needs an ideal for himself as a human being. It must be an ideal, moreover, which is not artificial but natural, not imposed upon him from without but implicit in his own nature, in the depths of his own being: an ideal which represents, indeed, the fulfilment of his nature in the deepest possible sense. It is this ideal, the ideal of human Enlightenment, that I have tried to communicate.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What are your responses to the traditional image of the Buddha?

2. Sangharakshita describes Enlightenment as a state of clear awareness, infinite love, and boundless energy – and also as “perfect, unconditioned freedom from all subjective limitations.”

   a. Which of these aspects of Buddhahood do you respond to most strongly?

   b. Are there any other qualities that you think are part of the ‘natural’ ideal for human beings?

3. Sangharakshita says that, no matter what ‘worldly’ pleasures we experience, until we fulfil our spiritual potential “there is still some corner of our heart which is not satisfied, which wants something more … something greater.”

   a. Does this agree with your experience?

   b. If it is true, does it throw any light on how the Buddha can be a refuge from dukkha (dissatisfaction or suffering?)

4. A Buddha, we are told, represents a new category of being: much more than human, just as human beings are much more than animals.

   a. Can you relate to this idea?

   b. Would you prefer to think of the Buddha as a more or less ordinary human being? Alternatively, would you prefer to think of him as a god?

5. Do you believe you can become Enlightened? How magnificent can you imagine yourself becoming?
Introduction
For Buddhists the figure of the Buddha represents first and foremost the ideal of Enlightenment, the awakened state that is the goal of the spiritual life. But the Buddha is not just a static image. He is also the centre of a story which tells us a great deal about the spiritual quest. The traditional biography of the Buddha is full of incidents that have a deep symbolic meaning. Some may be historically accurate. Others may be mythology. But this hardly matters. What is certain is that the traditional story brings a number of fundamental truths to life in a concrete and vivid way. We need to have an appreciation of the meaning of the Buddha’s life story to understand what the figure of the Buddha means within the Buddhist tradition.

In the next two sections of this course we will look at the story of the Buddha’s life, bringing out many of the more important symbolic episodes. In the following text Sangharakshita gives us a general overview of the Buddha’s life, and brings out the significance of two episodes with a particular symbolic significance for us – the Four Sights, and the Going Forth.

Who is the Buddha?
An edited extract from Who is the Buddha?, Sangharakshita.

‘One who is Awake’
The tradition which in the West we now call Buddhism sprang out of the Buddha’s experience of Enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree 2,500 years ago. It is with the Buddha, therefore, that Buddhism begins. But the question which at once arises is, ‘Who was the Buddha?’ It is useful, even for those who regard themselves as Buddhists of long standing, to think about this question.

The first thing we have to make clear is that the word ‘Buddha’ is not a proper name but a title. It means ‘one who Knows, one who Understands’. It also means ‘one who is Awake’ - one who has woken up, as it were, from the dream of life, because he sees the Truth, sees Reality.

The early life
This title was first applied to a man whose personal name was Siddhārtha, whose clan or family name was Gautama, and who lived in the sixth century BCE in the area which is partly in southern Nepal, partly in northern India. Fortunately we know quite a lot about his early career. We know that he came from a well-to-do, even patrician family. Tradition sometimes represents his father as being the king of the Śakya clan or tribe. But it seems more likely that he wasn’t so much the king as the elected president of the clan assembly, holding office for twelve years with the title of ājā, and that it was during this period that his son Siddhārtha Gautama, who afterwards became the Buddha, was born.
Siddhārtha received what was, by the standards of those days, a very good education. He didn’t go to school, of course, and it is not really clear whether he could read or write, but we know that he received an excellent training in all sorts of martial arts and exercises. From the wise old men of the clan he also learned, by word of mouth, various ancient traditions, genealogical lists, beliefs, and superstitions. He led a comfortable life, with no particular responsibilities. His father, a very affectionate, even doting, parent, married him off when he was quite young—some accounts say when he was only sixteen—and in due course a son was born.

The Four Sights
The traditional accounts make it clear that, despite his well-to-do way of life, Siddhārtha Gautama was very deeply dissatisfied. The legends speak of a sort of spiritual crisis, of a turning point, when the young patrician saw what are called the ‘Four Sights’. These Four Sights crystallize in a powerful form certain fundamental teachings of Buddhism, and throw a great deal of light on the Buddha’s own early spiritual development.

The legend goes that one beautiful, bright morning Siddhārtha felt like going out for a drive in his chariot, so he called his charioteer, whipped up the horses, and set out. They drove into the town and suddenly Siddhārtha saw his first Sight: he saw an old man. According to the legend he had never seen an old man before. Taking the account literally, this means that he had been shut up in his palace and hadn’t taken much notice of other people, hadn’t realized that there was such a thing as old age. But one can take it another way. Sometimes we see something as though for the first time. We have seen it a hundred, even a thousand times already, but one day we see it as though we had never seen it before. It was probably something like this that happened to Siddhārtha, and it gave him a shock. He said to his charioteer, ‘Who on earth is that?’ And the charioteer replied, ‘That is an old man.’ ‘Why is he so frail, so bent?’ ‘Well, it’s just that he’s old.’ And Siddhārtha asked, ‘But how did he get like that?’ ‘Well, everybody gets old sooner or later. It’s natural. It just happens.’ ‘Will it happen to me too?’ And the charioteer of course had to reply, ‘Yes, young as you are, this will inevitably happen to you. One day you too will be old.’ These words of the charioteer struck the future Buddha like a thunderbolt, and he exclaimed, ‘What is the use of this youth, what is the use of this vitality and strength, if it all ends in this!’ And sick at heart he returned to his beautiful palace.

The second Sight was the sight of disease. It was as though he had never seen anyone sick before, and he realized that all human beings are subject to maladies of various kinds. He had to face the fact that, strong and healthy though he was, he might at any time be struck down by disease.

The third Sight was that of a corpse being carried to the burning ground on a stretcher. He asked the charioteer, ‘What on earth is this?’ The charioteer said, ‘It is just a dead body’, and Siddhārtha said, ‘Dead? What has happened to him?’ ‘Well, as you can see he’s stiff, he’s motionless. He doesn’t breathe, doesn’t see, doesn’t hear. He’s dead.’ Siddhārtha gave a gasp, and said, ‘Does it happen to everybody, this death?’ So the charioteer drew a long sigh and said, ‘Yes, I’m afraid it does.’ Thereupon Siddhārtha realized that this would happen to him too one day. The revelation struck him very forcibly, like a thunderbolt. He saw how it was. You don’t want to grow old, but you can’t help it. You don’t want to fall sick, but you can’t help that either. So you start asking yourself, ‘How do I come to be here? Here I am with this urge to live, and to go on living, but I have got to die. Why? What is the meaning of it all? Why have I been made like this? Is it God who is responsible? Is it fate, or destiny? Or has it just happened? Is there any explanation at all?’
In this way Siddhārtha was brought up against these existential situations, and he started thinking about them very deeply. Then he saw a Fourth Sight, a holy man, walking along the street with his begging-bowl. He seemed so calm, so quiet, so peaceful, that the future Buddha thought, ‘Maybe he knows. Maybe this is the way. Maybe I should do likewise – should cut off all ties, all worldly connections, and go forth as a homeless wanderer as this man has done. Maybe in this way I shall find an answer to the problems that are tormenting me.’

**Going forth**

The story goes on to relate how one night, when everything was quiet and there was a full moon in the sky, Siddhārtha bade a last farewell to his sleeping wife and child. He wasn’t happy to leave them, but he had to go. He rode many miles that night, till he reached the river that marked the boundary of Śakya territory. There he left his horse, left his princely garments, cut off his long hair and his beard, and became a homeless wanderer in search of the truth.

This ‘going forth’ is psychologically very significant. It is not just becoming a monk. It is much more than that. It means cutting oneself off from the ties to blood and soil and kindred and leaving oneself free as an individual to work out one’s own salvation, one’s own spiritual destiny.

This is what Siddhārtha did. He got away from it all. He opted out. He’d had enough of worldly life and was now going to try to find out the truth, to try to see the truth for himself. The search was to last for six years.

**Asceticism**

In those days there were in India many people who professed to teach ways leading to the realization of truth. One of the most popular of these ways was that of self-torture. Now in this country we can’t really take this sort of thing seriously. But in India such practices are very much part of the atmosphere, and even now many Indians have the strong belief that self-torture is the way to heaven, or the way even to Enlightenment.

So it was in the Buddha’s day. There was a powerful movement of this sort, a movement teaching that if one wanted to gain the truth one had to subjugate, even mortify, the flesh. And that is exactly what Siddhārtha did. For six years he practised the severest austerities. He limited his food and his sleep, he didn’t wash, and he went around naked. As one of these accounts says, the fame of his austerities spread ‘like the sound of a great bell hung in the canopy of the sky.’ No one in India, he afterwards declared, had outdone him in self-torture and self-mortification. But he also said that it had led him nowhere. He had become famous as a great ascetic and had a number of disciples with him. But when he realized that this was not the way to Enlightenment, he had the courage to give it up.

**Meditation and Awakening**

He started eating again, and his disciples left him in disgust. And this is also significant. He had already left his family, left his friends, left his tribe, and in the end even his disciples deserted him. He was left utterly alone, and on his own he remained. He went about from place to place and eventually, we are told, he came to a beautiful spot on the banks of a fresh running river. There he sat down in the shade of a great tree, and made the resolution, I will not rise from this spot until I am Enlightened.’

So day after day, night after night, he sat there. As he sat he controlled and concentrated his mind, purified his mind, suppressed the mental hindrances, the defilements, and on the night
of the full moon of May, just as the morning star was rising — just as he fixed his mind on that star glittering near the horizon — full Illumination, full Enlightenment, arose.

It is obviously very difficult to describe this state. We can say it is the plenitude of Wisdom. We can say it is the fullness of Compassion. We can say that it is seeing the Truth face to face. But these are only words, and they do not convey very much. So let us simply say that at that moment the light dawned, and Siddhārtha Gautama became the Buddha.

**Teaching**

In a sense this was the end of his quest. He had become the Buddha, the ‘one who Knows’. He had found the solution to the riddle of existence. He was Enlightened, he was Awake. But in a sense it was only the beginning of his mission. Deciding to make known to humanity the Truth he had discovered, he left what we now call Bodhgayā and walked to Sārnāth, about one hundred miles away, gathered together the disciples who had left him when he gave up his austerities, and made known to them his great discovery. He gave his first discourse, or sutta, to his former followers.

Gradually a spiritual community grew up around the Buddha. He didn’t stay permanently in any one place, but roamed all over north-eastern India. He had a long life, gaining Enlightenment at the age of thirty-five and living to be eighty. So he had forty-five years of active life, spreading his teaching. The pattern seems to have been that for nine months of the year he wandered from place to place preaching, and then for three months took shelter from the torrential monsoon rains. Whenever he came to a village he would, if it was time for his one meal of the day, get out his begging-bowl and stand silently at the door of the huts, one after another. Having collected as much food as he needed, he would retire to the mango grove which, even now, is to be found on the outskirts of every Indian village, and sit down under a tree.

When he had finished his meal the villagers would gather round and he would teach them. Sometimes brahmans would come, sometimes wealthy landowners, sometimes peasants, sometimes merchants, sometimes sweepers, sometimes prostitutes. The Buddha would teach them all. And sometimes in the big cities he would preach to kings and princes. In this way he gained a great following and became in his own day the greatest and best known of all the spiritual teachers in India. And when he died there were thousands, even tens of thousands, of his disciples to mourn his departure, both monks and lay people, men and women.

In outline, such is the traditional biography of Siddhārtha Gautama, the Indian prince who became the Buddha. But does it really answer the question, ‘Who was the Buddha?’ This question, in its deeper sense, has been asked since the very dawn of Buddhism. In fact it is a question which was put to the Buddha himself, apparently, soon after his Enlightenment.

**Who are you?**

Journeying along the high road, the Buddha met a man called Dona. Dona was a brahmin, and skilled in the science of bodily signs. Seeing on the Buddha’s footprints the mark of a thousand-spoked wheel he followed him until he eventually found him sitting beneath a tree. There was a radiance about his whole being. We are told it was as though a light shone from his face — he was happy, serene, joyful. Dona was very impressed by his appearance, and he seems to have felt that this wasn’t an ordinary human being, perhaps not a human being at all. He came straight to the point, saying, ‘Who are you?’
Now the ancient Indians believed that the universe is stratified into various levels of existence, that there are not just human beings and animals, as we believe, but gods, and ghosts, and yakṣas, and gāndharvas, and all sorts of other mythological beings, inhabiting a multi-storey universe, the human plane being just one storey out of many. So Dona asked, 'Are you a yakṣa?' (a yakṣa being a rather terrifying sublime spirit living in the forest). But the Buddha said 'No'. So Dona tried again. 'Are you a gāndharva?' (a sort of celestial musician, a beautiful singing angel-like figure). Once again the Buddha said 'No', and again Dona asked, 'Well then, are you a deva?' (a god, a divine being, a sort of archangel). 'No.' Upon this Dona thought, 'That’s strange, he must be a human being after all!' And he asked him that too, but yet again the Buddha said 'No'. By this time Dona was thoroughly perplexed, so he demanded. 'If you are not any of these things, then who are you?' The Buddha replied, 'Those mental conditionings on account of which I might have been described as a yakṣa a gāndharva, as a deva, as a human being, all those conditionings have been destroyed by me. Therefore I am a Buddha.'

The word for mental conditionings is ‘saṁskāra’, which means all kinds of conditioned mental attitudes. It is these conditioned mental attitudes, these volitions or karma-formations as they are sometimes called, which, according to Buddhism, and Indian belief in general, determine the nature of our rebirth. The Buddha was free from all these, and so there was nothing to cause him to be reborn as a yakṣa, a gāndharva, a god, or even as a human being; and even here and now he was not in reality any of these things. He had reached the state of unconditioned consciousness, though his body might appear to be that of a man. Therefore he was called the Buddha, Buddha being as it were an incarnation, a personification, of the unconditioned mind.

You are the Buddha – potentially!
We have seen that ‘Buddha’ means ‘unconditioned mind’, or ‘Enlightened mind’. Knowing the Buddha therefore means knowing the mind in its unconditioned state. So if at this stage we are asked, ‘Who is the Buddha?’ we can only reply, ‘You yourself are the Buddha – potentially.’ We can really and truly come to know the Buddha only in the process of actualizing our own potential Buddhahood. It is only then that we can say from knowledge, from experience, who the Buddha is.

Going for Refuge
We cannot do this all at once. We have to establish, first of all, a living contact with Buddhism. We have to arrive at something which goes further than mere factual knowledge about Gautama the Buddha, but still falls far short of knowing the unconditioned mind, of really knowing the Buddha. This something that comes in between the two is what we call Going for Refuge to the Buddha. This means taking the ideal of Enlightenment as our ultimate objective, and trying our utmost to realize it. In other words, it is only by taking Refuge in the Buddha in the traditional sense that we can really know who the Buddha is. This is one of the reasons why I have always attached such great importance to the Refuges, not only to Going for Refuge to the Buddha, but also to the Dharma and to the Sangha.

In conclusion, it is only by taking Refuge in the Buddha, with all that that implies, that we can really and truly answer, from the heart, from the mind, and from the whole of our spiritual life, the question, ‘Who is the Buddha?’
Questions for reflection and discussion

1. As a young man the future Buddha lived a comfortable, opulent life, but he did not find this satisfying or meaningful. What might this say about the approach to happiness offered by the consumer society? Do you see any parallels in your own experience?

2. The first three of the ‘Four Sights’ were experiences that brought the future Buddha face-to-face with uncomfortable aspects of reality, and made him realise that the conventional approach to life was based on illusion. The Fourth Sight showed him that there was an alternative way of living that promised a deeper fulfilment. What have been your equivalents to the Four Sights? What experiences have led you to be here, studying the Dharma?

3. Gautama felt the need to leave his old life completely behind – the ‘Going Forth’. Why might cutting ourselves off from familiar people, places and roles – at least for a time – have a beneficial effect on our spiritual life? Does this throw any light on why retreats can be helpful? Are there any aspects of your life that keep you stuck in an out-of-date version of yourself?

4. After his Enlightenment the Buddha did not fit into any of the categories of being that people were familiar with. At a lower level, could we see freeing ourselves from the descriptions we use to define ourselves as an aspect of our spiritual lives? How do you define yourself: by age, gender, nationality, social class, education, subculture, political persuasion, and so on? Which of these descriptions are you particularly attached to?

5. What might it mean to say that the Buddha was “unconditioned mind”? 
Introduction
For Buddhists in the East the life story of the Buddha is much more than a historical account – it is a poetic myth full of profound meanings that resonate in the depths of the mind. In the following text Sangharakshita looks at a number of these mythic elements in the story of the Buddha, bringing out some aspects of their significance, and in the process making the point that from a spiritual point of view poetic truth is just as important as historical truth – or perhaps more so.

To feel the impact of the mythic and poetic elements in the Buddha’s story we need to open up to them imaginatively, and not just engage our rational, critical mind. This needs time, so it would be very helpful to read the text well before the study group, and then to follow up on the questions and suggestions at the end. In particular it might be helpful look at some representations of the incidents described in the text in Buddhist art, and to bring any art you find to the study group.

Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha

The language of the depths
If we look below the rational, conceptual surface of man’s mind, we find vast unplumbed depths which make up what we call the unconscious. The psyche in its wholeness consists of both the conscious and the unconscious. The unconscious, non-rational part of man is by far the larger part of his total nature, and its importance is far greater than we generally care to recognize. Consciousness is like a light froth playing and sparkling on the surface, whilst the unconscious is like the vast ocean depths, dark and unfathomed, lying far beneath. In order to appeal to the whole person, it isn’t enough to appeal just to the conscious, rational intelligence that floats upon the surface. We have to appeal to something more, and this means that we have to speak an entirely different language from the language of concepts, of abstract thought; we have to speak the language of images, of concrete form. If we want to reach this non-rational part of the human psyche, we have to use the language of poetry, of myth, of legend.

This other, no less important, language is one which many modern people have forgotten, or which they know only in a few distorted and broken forms. But Buddhism does very definitely speak this language, and speaks it no less powerfully than it speaks the language of concepts. Some people are under the impression that Buddhism speaks only the language of concepts, of reason; that it is a strictly rational system, even a sort of rationalism. Such a misunderstanding is in a way quite natural in the West. After all, most of our knowledge is derived from books,
going for refuge to the three jewels

magazines, lectures, etc., so that although we may not always be aware of this, our approach is in terms of rational, conceptual understanding. But if we go to the East we see a very different picture. In the Eastern Buddhist countries people tend to the other extreme. They tend to be moved and influenced by the images all about them without easily being able to give a rational, conceptual formulation of what they actually believe.

So far as Buddhism in the West is concerned, much more attention has been given to the conceptual, analytical, intellectual approach. We now have to give much more time and much more serious attention to the other type of approach, to begin to try to combine both these approaches, unite both the conceptual and the non-conceptual. We need a balanced spiritual life in which both the conscious and unconscious mind play their part.

It is therefore through the language of poetry and myth that we are going to approach our subject, changing over from the conceptual approach to the non-conceptual, from the conscious mind to the unconscious. Here we shall be encountering some of what I have called the ‘Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha’. To allow for this encounter, we have to be receptive, to open ourselves to these archetypal symbols, to listen to them and allow them to speak in their own way to us, especially to our unconscious depths, so that we do not just realize them mentally, but experience them and assimilate them, even allowing them eventually to transform our whole life.

The meaning of ‘archetypal symbolism’

Now, let us define our key terms. What is an archetype? Broadly speaking, an archetype is the original pattern or model of a work, or the model from which a thing is made or formed. And what do we mean by symbolism? A symbol is generally defined as a visible sign of something invisible. But philosophically and religiously speaking it is more than that: it is something existing on a lower plane which is in correspondence with something existing on a higher plane. To cite a common example, in the various theistic traditions, the sun is a symbol for God, because the sun performs in the physical universe the same function that God, according to these systems, performs in the spiritual universe: the sun sheds light and heat, just as God sheds the light of knowledge and the warmth of love into the spiritual universe. One can say that the sun is the god of the material world, and in the same way God is the sun of the spiritual world. Both represent the same principle manifesting on different levels. ‘As above, so below.’

Two kinds of truth

Various Western scholars in modern times have tried to write full, detailed biographies of the Buddha. There is quite a lot of traditional material available. Western scholars have explored this abundant material thoroughly, but having gone through the various episodes and incidents, they divide them into two great ‘heaps’. On one side, they put whatever they consider to be a historic fact. On the other side they put what they consider to be myth and legend. Now this is all right so far as it goes, but most of them go a step further, and start indulging in value judgements, saying that only what they regard as historical facts are valuable and relevant. As for the myths and legends, all the poetry of the account, they usually see this as mere fiction, to be discarded as completely worthless.

This is a very great mistake, for we may say that there are two kinds of truth: what we call scientific truth, the truth of concepts, of reasoning; and in addition to this — some would say above this — there is what we may call poetic truth, or truth of the imagination, of the intuition. This is at least equally important. The latter kind of truth is manifested in what we call myths and legends, as well as in works of art, in symbolic ritual, and also quite importantly
in dreams. And what we call the archetypal symbolism of the biography of the Buddha belongs
to this second category. It is not meant to be historic truth, or factual information, but poetic,
even spiritual, truth. We may say that this biography of the Buddha in terms of archetypal
symbolism is not concerned with the external events of his career, but is meant to suggest to
us something about his inner spiritual experience, and therefore to shed light on the spiritual
life for all of us.

Examples of archetypal symbolism
I will now give a few examples of archetypal symbolism from the biography of the Buddha.

The Twin Miracle
A traditional text says:

Then the Exalted One standing in the air at the height of a palm tree performed
various and diverse miracles of double appearance. The lower part of his body would
be in flames, while from the upper part there streamed five hundred jets of cold
water. While the upper part of his body was in flames, five hundred jets of cold water
streamed from the lower part. Next, by his magic power the Exalted One transformed
himself into a bull with a quivering hump. The bull vanished in the east and appeared
in the west. It vanished in the north and appeared in the south, it vanished in the
south and appeared in the north. And in this way the great miracle is to be described
in detail. Several thousand koṭis of beings, seeing this great miracle of magic, became
glad, joyful and pleased, and uttered thousands of bravos at witnessing the marvel.

I am not going to say anything here about the Buddha’s transformation into a bull – I am going
to concentrate here on the ‘Twin Miracle’ proper, in which the Buddha emits both fire and
water. First of all, the Buddha stands in the air. This signifies a change of plane, and is highly
significant. It represents the fact that what is described does not happen on the earth plane, or
on the historical plane. The Twin Miracle is not a miracle in the usual sense, not something
magical or supernormal happening here on this earth, but something spiritual, something
symbolic, happening on a higher metaphysical plane of existence.

Having stood in the air, in this metaphysical dimension, the Buddha emits fire and water
simultaneously: fire from the upper half of the body, water from the lower, and vice versa. On
the higher plane of existence where he now stands, fire and water are universal symbols. They
are found all over the world, in all cultures, all religions. Fire represents ‘spirit’, or ‘the
spiritual’; and water represents matter, the material. Fire, again, represents the heavenly,
principle; water the earthly principle. Fire represents the active, masculine principle; water the
passive, feminine principle. Fire represents the intellect, and water the emotions. Fire again
represents consciousness, and water the unconscious. In other words, fire and water between
them represent all the cosmic opposites.

The fact that the Buddha emitted fire and water simultaneously represents the conjugation of
these great pairs of opposites. This conjunction on all levels, and on the highest level of all
especially, is synonymous with what we call Enlightenment. This episode of the Twin Miracle
tells us that Enlightenment is not a one-sided affair, not a partial experience, but the union, the
conjunction, of opposites, of fire and water, at the highest possible level.

The ladder between heaven and earth
Let us now turn to another episode. According to the Theravada tradition, the Buddha
preached what became known as the Abhidharma to his deceased mother in the Heaven of the
Thirty-three Gods (a higher heavenly world where she was reborn when she died, seven days after his birth). When he returned to the earth, he descended by means of a magnificent staircase, attended by different gods, divinities, and angels. In the texts this staircase is described in very glorious terms, as being threefold, made up of gold, silver, and crystal.

The staircase or the ladder between heaven and earth is also a universal symbol. For example, in the Bible there is Jacob’s ladder, which has the same significance. The staircase is that which unites the opposites, which links, draws together, heaven and earth. In the Buddhist texts, the archetypal significance of this episode of the Buddha’s descent is enhanced by colourful, glowing descriptions in terms of gold and silver and crystal, and different coloured lights, and panoplies of coloured sun-shades and umbrellas, and flowers falling, and music sounding. These all make a strong appeal not to the conscious mind, but to the unconscious, to the depths.

*The World Tree*

Another important variant to the theme of the union of the opposites is what is generally known as the ‘World Tree’, or ‘Cosmic Tree’. The Buddha, according to the traditional account, gained Enlightenment at the foot of the Bodhi Tree – ‘Bodhi’ meaning transcendental wisdom, or ‘Awakening’. A tree’s roots go deep down into the earth, but at the same time its branches tower high into the sky. So the tree also links heaven and earth, is also a symbol of the union, or harmony, of opposites.

The World Tree is found in many mythologies. For instance, we have the Norse Yggdrasil, the World Ash – roots deep down, branches right up in the heavens, and all the worlds suspended on the branches. We also get the identification of the Christian cross with a World or Cosmic Tree. I have seen a representation of the crucifixion where branches were growing out of the sides of the cross, and the roots went deep down into the soil. The cross also, like the World Tree, links heaven and earth cosmerically, in the same way that Christ unites the human and the divine natures psychologically.

*The Diamond Throne*

Closely associated with the idea of a ladder, or a staircase, or a tree, is the image of the central point. In all the traditional accounts of the Buddha’s Enlightenment he is represented as sitting on what is called the ‘Vajrāsana’, which literally means the ‘Diamond Seat’, or ‘Diamond Throne’. The diamond, the vajra, in Buddhist tradition represents the transcendental element, the metaphysical base. According to tradition, the Vajrāsana is the centre of the universe. One can compare this with the corresponding Christian tradition that the cross stood on the same spot as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, from which Adam and Eve had eaten the apple, and that this spot represents the exact centre of the world. This centrality in the cosmos of the Vajrāsana suggests that Enlightenment consists in adopting a position of centrality. This metaphysical, or transcendental, centrality, which constitutes Enlightenment, amounts to the same as the union of opposites about which we have spoken.

*Events surrounding the Buddha’s Enlightenment*

Now we are going to take up not just isolated archetypal symbols, but a whole sequence of symbols. This series is connected with the most important event in the Buddha’s whole career, his attainment of Enlightenment. These symbols are represented by certain incidents usually regarded as historical, or partly historical, though their actual significance is much deeper.
The Victory over Mara

The first of these incidents is traditionally known as the 'Victory over Mara', the 'Satan' of Buddhism. The Buddha-to-be was seated in meditation at the foot of the tree, when he was attacked by terrible demon hosts, by all sorts of foul, unsightly, misshapen figures, led by Mara. These hosts and their attack are vividly depicted in Buddhist art and poetry. They were partly human, partly animal, hideously deformed, with snarling, leering, angry, and wrathful expressions, some of them lifting great clubs, others brandishing swords, all very menacing and frightful indeed. But all the stones, arrows, and flames, on reaching the edge of the Buddha’s aura of light turned into flowers and fell at his feet. The significance of this is obvious and doesn’t need to be explained, only to be felt. The Buddha wasn’t touched, wasn’t moved, by this terrible attack. His eyes remained closed, he remained in meditation with the same smile on his lips.

So Mara sent against the Buddha his three beautiful daughters, whose names are Lust, Passion, and Delight. They danced in front of the Buddha, exhibiting all their wiles, but the Buddha didn’t even open his eyes. They retired discomfited.

All this represents the forces of the unconscious in their crude, unsublimated form. The demons, the terrible misshapen figures, represent anger, aversion, dislike, and so on. The daughters of Mara represent the various aspects of craving and desire. Mara himself represents primordial ignorance, or unawareness.

Calling the Earth Goddess to Witness

The second incident is known as the ‘calling of the Earth Goddess to witness’. After he had been defeated Mara tried another trick. He said to the Buddha-to-be, “You are sitting on the central point of the universe, on the throne of the Buddhas of old. What right have you, just an ordinary person, to sit on that Diamond Throne where the previous Buddhas sat?” So the Buddha said. “In my past lives I have practised all the Perfections, the Perfection of Giving, of Morality, of Patience, of Energy, of Meditation, of Wisdom. I have reached a point in my spiritual evolution where I am about to gain Enlightenment. Therefore I am worthy to sit on this Diamond Throne, like the previous Buddhas when they gained Enlightenment.”

Mara wasn’t satisfied. He said, “All right, you say that you practised all these Perfections in your previous lives, but who is your witness?” So the future Buddha, who was seated on the Diamond Throne in the position of meditation, with his hands resting in his lap, just tapped on the earth – this is the famous earth-touching mūdra, or position. And up rose the Earth Goddess, bearing a vase in her hand. She bore witness, saying, “I have been here all the time. Men may come, men may go, but the earth always remains. I have seen all his previous lives. I have seen hundreds of thousands of lives in which he practised the Perfections. So I bear witness that he is worthy to sit in the seat of the Buddhas of old.”

This scene is also often depicted in Buddhist art. Sometimes the Earth Goddess is shown as dark green in colour, sometimes a beautiful golden-brown, always half-emerged from the earth. Basically, she represents the same forces as those represented by Māra’s daughters, but in their tamed, subdued, or sublimated aspect – ready to help, not hinder.

Brahma’s Request

The third incident is known as ‘Brahmā’s Request’. The Buddha, after his Enlightenment, was inclined to remain silent. He reflected, “This Truth, this Reality which I have discovered, is so difficult to see, so sublime, that ordinary people, their eyes covered with the dust of ignorance
and passion, are not going to see it. So it is better to remain silent, to remain under the Bodhi tree, not to go out into the world and preach.”

But then another great apparition arose. A great light shone forth, and in the midst of the light an ancient figure, the figure of Brahmā Sahampati, Brahmā the Great God, Lord of a Thousand Worlds, appeared before the Buddha with folded hands. He said, “Please preach, preach the Truth – there are just a few with little dust on their eyes. They will appreciate, they will follow.” The Buddha opened his divine eye and looked forth over the universe. He saw all beings, just like lotuses in a pond, in various stages of development. And he said, “For the sake of those with just a little dust over their eyes, those who are like lotuses half-way out, I will preach the Dharma.”

We shouldn’t of course take this incident literally, in the historical sense – the Buddha didn’t need to be asked to preach. Brahmā’s Request represents the manifestation within the Buddha’s own mind of the forces of Compassion which compelled him to make known the Truth he had discovered, to preach to mankind.

The Serpent King
For seven weeks the Buddha sat at the foot of the Bodhi tree, and in the middle of the seventh week there arose a great storm. The Buddha was Enlightened in the month of May, and seven weeks takes us to the middle of July, the beginning of the rainy season. In India, when the rainy season begins, in a matter of instants the sky becomes black and rain descends, not in bucketfuls, but in absolute reservoir-fuls. The Buddha was out in the open, under a tree, with just a thin robe – he couldn’t do much about it. But another figure arose out of the undergrowth: a great snake, King Mucalinda, the Serpent-King. He came and wrapped his coils around the Buddha and stood with his hood over his head like an umbrella, and in this way protected him from the downpour. This episode is often depicted in Buddhist art.

Then the rain disappeared, the storm-clouds cleared up, and the Serpent-King assumed a different form, that of a beautiful youth about sixteen years of age, who saluted the Buddha.

Some scholars, I am afraid, try to take this episode literally, saying, “Oh yes, it is well known that in the East snakes are sometimes quite friendly with holy men, and come and sit near them, and this is what must have happened.” But we cannot accept this pseudo-historical type of explanation. We are on a different plane, a different level of meaning altogether. All over the world, as we have seen, water, or the sea, or the ocean, represents the unconscious. And in Indian mythology the nāgas, that is to say, the serpents, or the dragons, live in the depths of the ocean. So the nāgas represent the forces in the depths of the unconscious in their most positive and beneficent aspect – and Mucalinda is the king of the nāgas.

The falling of the rain, the torrential downpour after seven weeks, represents a baptism, an aspersion. All over the world, pouring water on someone or on something represents the investiture of that person or that object with all the powers of the unconscious mind.

Mucalinda also stands for the powerful psychic energies surging up inside a person, especially at the time of meditation. Mucalinda’s assuming the form of a beautiful sixteen-year-old youth represents the new personality which is born as a result of this. Mucalinda in the new form salutes the Buddha: this represents the perfect submission of all the powers of the unconscious to the Enlightened mind.
Suggestions for reflection, research, and discussion

1. Do you agree that poetic truth is just as important as factual truth?

2. Which of the episodes or symbols described do you respond to most strongly?

3. Look for any representations of these incidents from the Buddha’s life in any books of Buddhist art you have access to, or on the internet, and bring them to the group. Alternatively you might like to draw or paint one of the incidents yourself.
The Buddha: The Buddha We Can Contact

Introduction
In the last session we saw that for many Buddhists the story of the Buddha’s life is not just a factual record of historical events. This week we look at why, for most Buddhists, the Buddha is not seen just as a teacher who is now long dead, and who can therefore have no effect on us in the here-and-now.

Imagining the Buddha and his qualities, bearing the Buddha in mind with respect, visualizing the Buddha or some other manifestation of Enlightenment – these are all important practices for many Buddhists, which have a definite spiritual purpose, and a positive effect on many people. We may see these practices as an exercise in creative imagination, a way of developing qualities we are not in touch with in ourselves. We may see the Buddha we can contact in imagination and meditation as an aspect of our own potential – what is sometimes called our own ‘Buddha Nature’. Or we may see these practices as a way to contact a powerful, external stream of spiritual energy. How we explain the positive effect of these practices may not matter, as long as we do not dismiss them out of prejudice or a narrow-minded rationalism.

In the presence of the Buddha
To understand how these practices developed it might help to imagine what it would have been like to be one of the early members of the Sangha, living and practicing in the presence of the Buddha. What would it be like to spend time with the Buddha, to experience the influence and inspiration of such a highly evolved being?

We can imagine that if we lived in the presence of the Buddha we would be constantly reminded of the qualities of Enlightenment, and our own potential for these qualities would be awakened and stimulated. We can imagine that as a result of this influence these qualities would grow and strengthen, becoming a more powerful part of our being, while our more unskilful tendencies would tend to wither away. We can imagine that we would quite naturally come to act, speak, and think more like the Buddha. We can imagine that, over time, we would become more like the Buddha, in quite a natural way, with little apparent effort on our part.

Many of the early Buddhists must have been aware that simply spending time with the Buddha had a powerful effect on them, and after the Buddha’s death they must have realized what they had lost. Inevitably they would have tried to get some of the benefits of being with the Buddha even though he was no longer physically present – and in this way no doubt the practice of mindfulness of the Buddha developed. In fact as we will see this practice arose even before the Buddha’s death, because not all of his disciples could be with him even when he was alive. But it was in the years and centuries after the Buddha’s Parinirvāṇa that this style of practice really came into its own, becoming one of the most common meditation practices not
long after the Buddha’s death, and in later forms of Buddhism giving rise to many different forms of devotion, many different meditation practices, and many so-called ‘archetypal’ Buddhas and Bodhisattvas embodying different aspects of Enlightenment.

**The benefits**

According to the traditional commentaries, keeping the Buddha and his qualities in mind has many benefits. It gives us courage, and the strength to rise above the suffering of living in this world. It leads to the fullness of faith, and bestows wisdom and understanding. We come to feel as though we are living in the presence of the Enlightened One, and if we are tempted to act unskilfully we are restrained by a wholesome shame, as though we were face to face with the Buddha himself. Over time our body becomes “as worthy of veneration as a shrine room”, and our mind “tends towards the plane of the Buddhas.” Even if this is as far as we get in this life, we will progress to a “happy destiny.” It seems to be a spiritual and psychological law that what we focus our minds on, we become. Focusing our mind on an Enlightened being ripens our own potential for Enlightenment, so that we gradually come more and more to “dwell in the sphere of the supreme Buddhas.”

**An example from the time of the Buddha**

The roots of the practice of recollection of the Buddha go right back to the time of the historical Buddha himself, as we can see from the following extract from the Sutta Nipāta, one of the oldest surviving Buddhist texts.

In this story an old man called Piṅgiya is talking to the brahmin Bāvari, and praising the Buddha to the skies. Bāvari may be a bit put out by Piṅgiya’s praise for this non-brahmin teacher, because he asks him, “If this Gotama is so wonderful, why don’t you spend all your time with him? Why aren’t you with him right now?”

Piṅgiya replies that he cannot be with the Buddha in body, because he is old and frail, so that he cannot travel with his teacher. But, he says, using the power of mindfulness and imagination, he is able to be in the presence of the Buddha all the time, so that in his mind he is never away from him. The Buddha then seems to speak to Piṅgiya, although physically he is many miles away, telling him that other people before him have been liberated by the power of faith or confidence (śraddhā in Sanskrit, saddhā in Pali), and predicting that Piṅgiya himself will gain Enlightenment in this way, through this very practice.

**Piṅgiya’s Praises of The Way to the Beyond**

*From the Sutta-Nipāta, trans. H. Saddhatissa, pp131-133.*

‘I will sing you the praises of The Way to the Beyond’, said Piṅgiya (when he returned to where the brahmin Bāvari lives on the banks of the River Godhāvari). ‘It was described to us by this man exactly as he saw it. But then, there isn’t any reason why a man like him should lie - a mammoth of knowledge and completely pure, a man without desire.

When a voice has none of the glibness of pride and none of the ingrained stains of ignorance, then its words are full of sweetness and beauty. It is such words that I praise now.

They call him Buddha, Enlightened, Awake, dissolving darkness, with total vision, and knowing the world to its ends, he has gone beyond all the states of being and of becoming. He has no inner poison-drives: he is the total elimination of suffering. This man, brahmin Bāvari, is the man I follow.
It is like a bird that leaves the bushes of the scrubland and flies to the fruit trees of the forest. I too have left the bleary half-light of opinions; like a swan I have reached a great lake.

Up till now, before I heard Gotama’s teaching, people had always told me this: “This is how it has always been, and this is how it will always be”; only the constant refrain of tradition, a breeding ground for speculation.

This prince, this beam of light, Gotama, was the only one who dissolved the darkness. This man Gotama is a universe of wisdom and a world of understanding, a teacher whose Dhamma is the Way Things Are, instant, immediate and visible all around, eroding desire without harmful side-effects, with nothing else quite like it anywhere in the world.’

‘But Piṅgiya’, said Bāvari, ‘why then don’t you spend all your time, your every moment, with this man Gotama, this universe of wisdom, this world of understanding, this teacher whose Dhamma is the Way Things Are, instant, immediate and visible all around, eroding desire without harmful side-effects, and with nothing else quite like it anywhere in the world?’

‘Brahmin, Sir’, said Piṅgiya, ‘there is no moment for me, however small, that is spent away from Gotama, from this universe of wisdom, this world of understanding, this teacher whose teaching is the Way Things Are, instant, immediate and visible all around, eroding desire without harmful side effects, with nothing else quite like it anywhere in the world.’

‘You see, Sir’, said Piṅgiya, ‘with constant and careful vigilance it is possible for me to see him with my mind as clearly as with my eyes, in night as well as day. And since I spend my nights revering him, there is not, to my mind, a single moment spent away from him. I cannot now move away from the teaching of Gotama: the powers of confidence and joy, of intellect and awareness, hold me there. Whichever way this universe of wisdom goes it draws me with it.

Physically, I cannot move like that - my body is decaying, I am old and weak - but the driving power of purposeful thought propels me with it without break.

There was a time when, writhing in the mud of the swamps, I could only drift from one stone to the next. But then I saw the Sambuddha, fully awake and free from defilement.’

Then the Buddha spoke:

‘Piṅgiya’, he said, ‘other people have freed themselves by the power of confidence. Vakkali, Bhadrāvudha and Āļavi-Gotama have all done this. You too should let that strength release you; you too will go to the further shore, beyond the draw of death.’

‘These words’, said Piṅgiya, ‘are the words of a man of wisdom. As I hear them I become more confident. This man is Sambuddha: he has opened the curtains and woken up. There is nothing barren there; his mind is clear and luminous.

Everything accessible to knowledge is known to him, even the ultimate subtleties of godhood. There are no more questions for the doubtful who come to him: the teacher has answered them all.

Yes, I shall go there. I shall go beyond change, I shall go beyond formations; I shall go beyond comparison. There are no more doubts. You may consider this as mind released.’
Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Have you ever looked up to somebody as an example or role-model? (You could think of fictional characters and well-known people as well as people you have known personally.) What qualities did you particularly admire? Do you think you could have related to these qualities as easily in the abstract, without thinking of a person who embodied them?

2. Are there any qualities of the Buddha that you particularly admire or aspire to?

3. Try for a while imagining yourself in the presence of the Buddha or some other figure you admire – perhaps bring them to mind as you meditate, or imagine that they are with you as you go about some daily task. What effect does this have? Tell the group about it.

4. Why might recollection of the Buddha give us courage?

5. Do you agree that ‘mindfulness of the Buddha’ could be a useful practice? How do you think it might work? How could you bring an element of it into your own practice?

6. At the end of Píñiya’s praises the Buddha seems to speak to Píñiya, although physically he is many miles away. How do you interpret this?
Introduction
In the second week of this course we saw that a Buddhist is someone who ‘Goes for Refuge’ to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Since then we have explored the significance of the Buddha. But what about the Dharma? What exactly is the Dharma? And what does it mean to ‘Go for Refuge’ to it? These are the questions we will be exploring in this session and the next.

What is the ‘Dharma’
‘Dharma’ is a Sanskrit word that can mean many things. The most relevant meanings for this discussion are, firstly, ‘the Truth’, in the highest sense, as the nature of reality, and secondly, the teachings of Buddhism. But ‘Truth’ and ‘reality’ are large abstract concepts, and the teachings of Buddhism are vast, diverse, and can sometimes seem contradictory. How can we Go for Refuge – how can we commit ourselves to living by – anything so difficult to pin down?

Can we boil the teachings of the Buddhist tradition down to their essence? Can we sum the Dharma up in a single, logical concept or formula, that we can see is clearly true, and base our life and practice on? Surely we need to do this before we can really Go for Refuge to it? But unfortunately this is not really possible.

Beyond any one concept, practice or formula
If we think of the Dharma as the Truth, then the Buddha and the other spiritually advanced figures of the Buddhist tradition have been unanimous in stating that this ultimate nature of reality is beyond any concept that can be expressed in words. And if we think of the Dharma as the teachings of Buddhism, then different Buddhists will often emphasise different aspects according to their temperament, background, culture, and stage of development. If we try to limit the Dharma to any one concept, any one teaching, or any one practice, we diminish it to the level of our own understanding, and exclude aspects that are vitally important for some people. The Buddha made it clear that he considered whatever helps human beings to transcend their present limited state as Dharma, and people are so diverse that what we need to do this cannot be summed up in any one simple formula.

The big ideas behind the Dharma
But having said this there are some formulations of the Dharma that are so fundamental that they do give us a framework for our understanding. Until we ourselves have direct experience of the wordless Truth, we need these concepts to keep our life and our practice aligned with the nature of reality, as it is seen by those who do have this direct experience. We need to understand and keep in mind the big ideas that underlie what Buddhists call ‘Right View’. Unless we do this our lives will tend to be governed by the usually unconscious and unquestioned beliefs, values and world-views that we have been conditioned to accept by our family, education, peer group and culture, and by the particular historic period in which we
happen to live. And, because these beliefs are often not aligned with reality, they will tend to lead us towards dissatisfaction, rather than towards growth and fulfilment.

So what are some of these big ideas, these fundamental concepts of the Dharma? Any short-list would probably start with the teaching of conditioned co-production and its corollary, the law of karma. It would then probably move on to include the Four Noble Truths, as well as the Three Laksañas, the marks or characteristics of conditioned phenomena. In this session we are trying to get an initial understanding of the basis of the Dharma in one brief text, and we cannot go into all of these ideas in enough depth to do them anything like justice. Conditioned Co-Production is a subtle concept with many implications, which we will explore later in Year One, and in more detail in subsequent years of the mitra course. The Three Laksañas are also discussed later in this course. Here we will focus on the Four Noble Truths, a teaching that has the virtue of being the Buddha’s own first attempt to communicate his vision in words.

The Four Noble Truths
The teaching of the Four Noble Truths is a particularly good framework for an initial understanding of the Dharma, because it deals with the problem of human dissatisfaction. Most – perhaps all – of what we human beings do, say and think is associated with our attempt to escape from dissatisfaction or suffering, or, to put it the other way around, to find satisfaction and happiness. The teaching of the Four Noble Truths does not discount this quest for satisfaction, but it points out that the way we normally go about it has not worked so far, it gives us an analysis of why this approach has not worked, and it offers us an alternative that really does lead to lasting fulfilment.

If we see the truth of this teaching it has the potential to radically re-orientate our search for happiness – the driving force behind our lives - so that we change the way we live in a way that really does begin to create happiness, rather than taking us further from it.

The Four Noble Truths are fundamental because they tackle our basic problem - the fact that life as we normally live it does not give us the happiness we are looking for. They do this using a traditional format used for diagnosis in ancient Indian medicine: they describe the disease, the cause of the disease, the prognosis or outlook, and the cure.

As the Buddha expressed them, the Four Noble Truths are:

1. The Truth of Dukkha – which means dissatisfaction, discomfort, unease, or actual suffering.
2. The Truth of the Origin of Dukkha, which is craving.
3. The Truth of the Cessation of Dukkha, which is that it can be overcome, by going beyond craving.
4. The Truth of the Path leading to the cessation of Dukkha, is the Noble Eightfold Path.

The First Noble Truth
The First Truth is sometimes wrongly said to be that ‘Life is suffering’. This misinterpretation has given the opponents of Buddhism a handy stick with which to beat it as being pessimistic and life-denying. But suffering is just the most extreme meaning of the Pali word dukkha, which more commonly means something like uncomfortable, unsatisfactory, uneasy, or ill-fitting. As Sangharakshita has pointed out, Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic – it is melioristic (from the Latin melior, meaning better.) The Dharma takes an honest look at our situation, and then suggests ways we can make it better.
What the First Truth is saying is that life as it is normally lived does not bring real lasting satisfaction or fulfilment. This is simply to take an honest look at our situation – if life as it is normally lived did bring real satisfaction and fulfilment, then most people most of the time would be in a state of satisfaction. This we obviously are not. If people in general were in a state of satisfaction, they would not need more than they have now, and the consumer society would grind to a halt. We probably do not feel that ‘life is suffering’. We may feel that our life is in many ways a rich and happy one. But we want more. Something is missing.

Traditionally dukkha is categorised in several different ways. The Buddha often repeated the formula that ‘birth is dukkha, old age is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha. To get what we dislike is dukkha. To be separated from what we like is dukkha. Not to get what we want, that also is dukkha.’ Other classifications build on this to divide dukkha into:

- The inescapable suffering that we experience because we are mortal beings with an impermanent body, living in an often hostile environment (called ‘dukkha-dukkha’).
- The suffering of having to put up with what we do not like, and of not getting what we do like.
- ‘The suffering of change’ – the fact that even when life is enjoyable we know that the present situation cannot last forever, which often introduces an element of anxiety and regret even into pleasant situations.
- ‘Existential suffering’ – which arises from the fact that even if our outward life was perfect in every way, we would still not be satisfied and fulfilled as long as we are not expressing our spiritual potential.

The Second Noble Truth
The Second Noble Truth tells us that the origin of the dukkha we experience is craving, or thirst in a literal translation. It tells us that the reason we find life so unsatisfactory is that the way we look for satisfaction actually causes us more suffering. There are a number of ways we can understand this.

The word craving is shorthand for an approach to life that tries to wrest happiness from the world by grabbing the things we like, pushing away the things we don’t like, and generally organising the ever-changing flux of events into a pattern that suits our demands. We tend to think that we can be happy and satisfied when – and only when – we have got the world around us organised in a particular way, so that events and other people fit in with our likes and dislikes. And so we devote our energies to bringing this about.

But if we make our happiness depend on the changeable and uncertain world around us, we are doomed to be unhappy and dissatisfied a lot of the time. The reasons for this are implied by the classification of the types of dukkha we looked at in the last section.

For one thing, life contains an inescapable element of suffering – birth, sickness, old age, death, and all the pains and discomforts that come from having a fragile, temporary body. If we expect not to experience this ‘dukkha-dukkha’, and if we do not cultivate the personal qualities and meaningful life that allow us to put up with it philosophically, then we just add another element of psychological and emotional suffering to the inevitable physical suffering we experience. The Buddha illustrated this point with a parable about two arrows. He said that we had no choice about being wounded by the first arrow – dukkha-dukkha – but that what we usually do is make the suffering far worse, by stabbing ourselves with another arrow, more painful than the first.
As well as inevitably experiencing an element of physical suffering, we can never get just what we like in this world, and entirely avoid what we don’t like, and the constant striving to do the impossible is a source of continual stress and disappointment. And then, even if we do succeed in getting what we like for a while, this state can never last – and deep down we know it – so that even in the midst of pleasure we feel anxiety. The ever-changing flux of events that we are a part of simply cannot be organised into any stable arrangement for long, so it simply will not stay as we want it. And then finally, even if by some miracle we could organise the outer world around us permanently into a state we liked – even if we could be rich and famous and praised, with the perfect partner, surrounded by sensory pleasures, living a life of complete luxury – perhaps on the most idyllic tropical island we could imagine, or in whatever dream scenario appeals to us – and even if we and our loved ones never got ill, never got old and never died – this on its own would not make us fulfilled.

True fulfilment and happiness comes from our inner being, not from our outer circumstances. If our inner world is plagued by the negative mental states that come from a narrow preoccupation with our own desires, then we will be unhappy in paradise. On the other hand if we have the rich, warm, expansive inner world of someone who is in touch with their spiritual potential, and the inner strength of someone whose life is about something greater than their own personal likes and dislikes, then we will be deeply fulfilled even in the midst of life’s inevitable suffering and adversity.

Like the First Noble Truth, this Second Truth of the origin of dukkha has been widely misinterpreted. For example, it is often said that Buddhists think that desire is the cause of suffering, and that all desire is therefore undesirable. But many forms of desire are necessary and good. Our desire for the necessities of life keeps us physically healthy. Our desire for friendship, beauty, and meaningful work pushes us in the direction of a fulfilling life. Our desire to fulfil our spiritual potential pushes us in the direction of the Dharma. So it seems that the problem that the Second Truth points to has nothing to do with such healthy desires, it has to do specifically with what has been called ‘craving’. So how is this craving different from healthy desire?

**Craving versus healthy desire**
Sangharakshita has defined what he calls neurotic craving as desire for something that cannot satisfy the need we want it to satisfy. A glass of water will satisfy our thirst, and a wholesome meal will satisfy our body’s need for food. But alcohol, junk food, or a piece of consumer gadgetry will not satisfy us if what we really lack is friendship, peace of mind, or the healthy self-esteem that comes from living a meaningful life. New clothes, a new partner, a new car, a new computer, a bigger bank balance, a more prestigious job, an expensive meal, or an exotic holiday – there is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these. But none of them will do more than distract us from the emptiness and dissatisfaction we feel if we are ignoring our spiritual potential and living below our real spiritual level. And if we base our happiness on having our wants for such things satisfied, we actually create suffering rather than satisfaction for ourselves. We put ourselves on a never-ending treadmill of unhealthy desire, chasing a carrot that cannot be caught. We put ourselves in a position of constant disappointment and frustration.

**‘Selfish Grasping’**
When the Buddha taught the Second Truth he summed up the cause of our dissatisfaction in just one word – craving, or literally ‘thirst’. But it is possible to flesh this word out with more detail. Buddhists in many traditions tend to emphasise that this craving the Buddha talked about is the result of our deluded obsession with ourselves. Tibetan Buddhists, for example,
often bring this out by using a phrase like ‘selfish grasping’ when translating the Four Truths. This phrase underlines two aspects of unhealthy craving – that it is narrowly selfish, and that it has a tight, grasping quality.

To give an example of the way our dissatisfaction and suffering can be related to our deluded focus on ourselves, we might consider the following quote from a talk on BBC radio on the Noble Truths, given by the American translator and academic Robert Thurman:

...[our] wrong knowing of the nature of the world puts us in an impossible situation. If I’m the most real thing in the world, that makes me the most important thing in the world. It will be universally recognized that not a single other person in the world will agree with me on that point. The material world doesn’t pay that much attention to me. And time doesn’t pay much attention to me as a temporary, ephemeral mind and body complex. And therefore the world is against the reality that I perceive.

So I am in conflict with the world all the time, from my basic perception of things. And being in conflict with the world, both other beings and inanimate things, I am going to lose that conflict, always. If you think you’re ... the most important, and the world disagrees, you are going to lose that argument with the world. You will die, you will get sick, people will not like you, people will not do what you want, and you will be forced to do what they want. And therefore you will suffer.

Perhaps it is also significant that Tibetan Buddhists often use the word ‘grasping’ when they translate this Truth. Our tendency to grasp tightly onto the positive things in life can crush the pleasure out of them. All too often we spoil our happiness by grasping at pleasant experiences, expecting too much of them, wanting them to last rather than enjoying them as they pass, and wanting them repeated as soon as possible, so that they become an object of craving in the future. A pleasant meal, a holiday, a relationship, time spent experiencing the beauty of nature, aesthetic enjoyment, even the delights of meditation – we can spoil all of these by thinking, ‘Is this giving me the enjoyment I expect? How long will this last? When can I have this again?’

The Third Noble Truth
The First and Second Noble Truths can come as a shock, saying, as they do, that the way we normally look for happiness actually causes us more suffering. But the Third Truth gives us the good news – if life as it is normally lived leads to dissatisfaction, a different sort of life leads to fulfilment, and a deeper sort of happiness than we can get from any number of possessions or passing pleasures. Yes, we are ill. Yes, we have been making this illness worse by our behaviour. But there is a cure, once we are willing to admit this. Until then we are like the wheezing, breathless smoker who insists that he feels fine – just a bit of indigestion when walking uphill – and that his Uncle Fred smoked a pack a day and lived to be ninety. So the Third Truth is very good news – the doctor is giving us a very good prognosis – but only if we accept the bad news first.

The Third Truth is based on the fact that our dissatisfaction is the product of conditions, and can be overcome by changing those conditions. It can be overcome by eroding our craving, by expanding our self-centred view of life, and by loosening our grasping. We can go beyond suffering and dissatisfaction by transcending our narrow vision of life, and living in a more open, expansive way.
The Fourth Noble Truth
The Fourth Truth tells us that the way to do this – the way to expand our vision and reduce our craving – is to follow a progressive path of spiritual development that affects every aspect of how we live our lives. This is what Buddhists call the Noble Eightfold Path. In the next year of the Mitra course we will be exploring the Eightfold Path in some detail, so here we will just try to give a general picture of it, and a feeling for what it is about.

In Sangharakshita’s exposition, the Eightfold Path covers:

1. Vision – the way we see the world and our role in it
2. Emotion
3. Speech
4. Action
5. Livelihood
6. Effort
7. Awareness
8. Samādhi – which could be interpreted as either meditation, or the wisdom that arises from higher states of being.

These eight aspects are like an expanded diagram of the basic Threefold Path of ethics, meditation and wisdom, showing its different components, and how they fit together. Essentially the Eightfold Path is saying that if we consistently practice the precepts more and more deeply in all areas of our life, if we cultivate mindfulness and positive emotion, if we expand our vision by exposing ourselves to the Dharma, and if we deepen our insight, then over time we will become larger beings, with a larger vision, and a more expansive approach to life. We will become the sort of beings who crave less, are less obsessed with themselves, and do not grasp so tightly at experiences. We will no longer build our quest for happiness on getting short-lived pleasures, or impermanent possessions, or the approval of others, or on status and reputation. Instead we will get a far deeper sense of happiness and fulfilment from becoming more like the sort of being we have it in us to be, no matter what the changeable, fleeting universe throws at us. To quote the Theravadin monk Ajahn Sucitto:

Circumstances such as illness or good fortune come and go, but what lingers with us are internal conditions. If we have peace of mind, we can weather through the rough patches, but guilt, hatred or depression will cloud the brightest day. A millionaire or a king can be beset with worry and mistrust, but a property-less monk can dwell in ease and fulfilment. Suffering and the cessation of suffering live in our minds and hearts.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Briefly express your understanding of the Four Noble Truths in your own words – maybe a sentence for each Truth.

2. How do you respond to the idea that life as it is normally lived – chasing what we like and avoiding what we dislike – is bound to be unsatisfactory? Do you think this is true? Do you like the idea? (Notice that these are different questions!)
3. Think of some examples of the different types of dukkha in your own experience. Which is the most important source of dissatisfaction or suffering for you?

4. Does your experience support the idea that we suffer most when we are focussed on our own wants and fears, while we are happiest when we are focussed on something beyond ourselves? Do you think there are some ways of being less focussed on our own desires which are unhealthy and do not lead to spiritual growth? What distinguishes unhealthy self-sacrifice from the self-transcendence that leads towards liberation?

5. “If the Four Noble Truths have got it right, the approach to happiness offered by the consumer society will actually make us more unhappy.” Discuss!
1.1.8  
The Dharma: The Many Dimensions of the Dharma  

**Richness and diversity**  
Last week we looked at the Four Noble Truths, one of the most concise and widely accepted formulations of the Buddha’s teaching. One way to paraphrase these Truths might be to say that life as it is normally lived is unsatisfactory; that the cause of our dissatisfaction is our craving and narrow self-obsession; and that the way to liberate ourselves from this is to follow a path of ethical integrity, meditation, and increasing spiritual vision. In his first discourse the Buddha used the formula of the Noble Eightfold Path to sum up this path of liberation. But he also used other formulations, and in the millennia since his death his followers have developed even more. Some of these different versions emphasise one element of the Threefold Path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom more than the others. Some are particularly adapted to the needs of different times, cultures, or types of people. Some emphasise particular lifestyles, qualities, or practices, such as a simple monastic life, long hours of meditation, selfless altruism, or deep faith.

This diversity and richness of Buddhism can seem confusing, but it is in keeping with the Buddha’s original teaching. The Buddha said clearly that the Dharma is whatever helps us to develop spiritually. He also said that the teachings he had given during his lifetime where just a small fraction of the genuine Dharma teachings that could be offered to sentient beings – as he put it, like a handful of leaves compared to all the leaves in the forest. In saying this he was in effect giving his approval for his more highly developed followers in later ages – those who had followed the path and realised its fruits - to develop the teachings for their own time and place.

**The Path of Regular Steps**  
But although the diversity and richness of the Dharma is a natural development of the Buddha’s teaching, it can still pose a problem for present day Buddhists. In any bookshop we have easy access to a vast range of different teachings, aimed at many different levels of experience, and from many different schools, in a way that has never been the case for Buddhists in the past. How can we make sense of it all, let alone go for refuge to this confusing mass of practices and ideas?

One answer is that we need to commit ourselves – at least provisionally – to practising one version of the path, and then see that as the most important part of the Dharma, for us, for the time being. If we pick up a bit from one book here, then practise something else from another tradition when we get bored, then move on to the next thing that catches our eye, we will not get far. (As one teacher has put it, it may be possible to get from Bombay to New York by travelling either East, West, North, or South; but if we go a few miles East, then a few miles North, then a few miles West, then a few miles South, we will end up back where we started.) At some point we need to stop trying out a bit of this and a bit of that, and start treading the
‘Path of Regular Steps’. We need to follow a coherent, progressive path of practice, where each step lays the foundation for the next, in a context where we can get advice and support from other people who have trodden the same path themselves.

The Dharma is a path of growth, and growth happens in a systematic, organic way, with one step following another, as with the growth of a plant. There is no point in trying to get a recently sprouted seedling to produce flowers. At the present moment it needs to produce leaves and roots. If the way we treat it is not appropriate for its stage of growth, it will not benefit, and we may actually harm it. Practising the Dharma is much the same.

So we need to follow a progressive path of practice. This normally means following the path as set out by one particular tradition, especially in the earlier stages. When we become Mitras we commit ourselves provisionally to the Triratna Buddhist Community as our context for practice. Along with this we commit ourselves to practising the path as set out by Triratna – at least provisionally, for the time being. We need to give this path an honest try, and see if it works. The path offered by Triratna is an attempt to apply the fundamental teachings and practices of Buddhism in a balanced way, which is firmly rooted in the basic Buddhist tradition, yet adapted for present-day needs and conditions. Committing ourselves to this particular path does not mean that we cannot get inspiration from other traditions. But it does give us the basic framework of understanding and regular practice that allows us to benefit from what inspires us in the whole Buddhist tradition, rather than just being confused and distracted by the diversity of teachings on offer.

**What Going for Refuge to the Dharma is**

*Confidence and commitment to practice*

So the most basic level of Going for Refuge to the Dharma is to be committed to practising the teaching as it applies to us here and now, in the particular version of the path we are following, and among the spiritual community we are in contact with – in our case Triratna. For most of us this starts with a recognition that the parts of the Dharma we have been introduced to make sense, and that the practices we have tried have had a positive effect on us. We may also see that the path seems to have had a positive effect on other people who have been practising longer than we have. So we develop some basic confidence in the main teachings of Buddhism.

Our confidence then leads us to a firm decision to practice what is relevant to us now, at our particular stage of the path, for the sake of our own well-being, and also for the well-being of others around us. This commitment to practising the teachings that we need at our present stage of progress is probably the most important part of going for refuge to the Dharma. For one person it might be a commitment to meditate every day, to express less negativity in speech, or to spend time with other Buddhists. For someone else it might take a different form because of different needs; and even in the case of a single individual it will change over time.

*‘Sense of rightness’*

Beyond this everyday commitment to putting the teachings into practice, Going for Refuge to the Dharma may, for some people, involve an intuitive, heartfelt sense of the rightness of the teachings. We may experience a sense of certainty that can seem too deep for words, a sense of the profound importance of what we have come across, or a sense of personal connection, almost as though we were remembering the teachings rather than coming across them for the first time. We may have a sense that what is essential in the Dharma does in fact emanate from a consciousness higher than our own, and a commitment to approach it with the respect
and even reverence it deserves. It may involve a sense of gratitude, fuelled by a recognition
that without a viable spiritual path life would be meaningless. And this gratitude may express
itself in a desire to help make the Dharma available to others, knowing that other people need
the Dharma just as much as we do.

The mythic dimension
To go for refuge to the Dharma in the fullest way we need to get rid of any sense that the
Dharma consists of normal (if rather clever) ideas, stemming from people much like ourselves
— on a similar level to the books on self-improvement we can find in any bookshop. Much of
the written Dharma emanates from the historical Buddha himself. Other parts originate from
other individuals who were also Enlightened, or perhaps were able to contact the Enlightened
Mind in deep meditation. In each case the origin is the Enlightened Mind, a level of
consciousness far beyond our own.

Recognising that the Dharma comes from a higher consciousness or level of being can open us
up to a more poetic or mythic vision, which will enrich our experience of going for refuge to
the Dharma. The Dharma is sometimes spoken of as ‘the voice of the Buddha’, with ‘the
Buddha’ here standing not just for a historical individual, but for a principle at work both in the
universe and in the depths of our being — a principle that is seeking to help us to grow and
evolve. This ‘voice of the Buddha’ is sometimes traditionally said to speak to each individual in
their own language, telling them exactly what they need to know at their present level of
development.

Sangharakshita has spoken of the Dharma as the action of the Enlightened Mind as it seeks to
communicate with unenlightened beings like ourselves. He goes on to say that concepts and
language are not the only way the Enlightened Mind communicates with us. In fact words are
the grossest form the Dharma can take – symbols and images are a richer form of
communication:

The Enlightened mind comes down a step, as it were, to the level of …images. On this
level are… images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas… images benign and wrathful;
images, perhaps above all, that are brilliantly coloured and luminous, arising out of
the depths of infinite space. They are not created by the individual human mind, nor
by the collective consciousness, nor even by the collective unconscious. Perhaps these
images are not created at all, but are as it were, co-eternal with the Enlightened
consciousness itself… These images… reveal everything. They reveal it in terms of
form or colour. On this level, no thoughts, no ideas, or words are necessary.3

Other Buddhist teachers have also emphasised that the Dharma need not be limited to words
and ideas:

The language of religion is not the language of concepts but of symbols. When these
symbols are conceptualized, they lose their vitality, their multi-dimensionality, and
are reduced to mere clichés. The multi-dimensionality of a symbol makes it the
representative of a higher reality, in which the religious person, like a true poet or
artist, is at home. Symbols are the key to the “other reality”, they open up for us new
dimensions of experience. Wherever Buddhism established itself, art and literature
flourished. Sculpture, painting and architecture, poetry and philosophy, music and
dance-drama became forms of expression for a religious world-feeling, and nature

3 Sangharakshita, A Guide to the Buddhist Path, p72.
herself became a living textbook for inner vision, as the Zen landscape painters and poets of the Far East show us. The “other reality” cannot be described using the categories of our everyday consciousness, it can only be discovered by means of certain symbols or archetypal forms.\(^4\)

This more poetic way of talking about the Dharma will not appeal to everyone. Many people will prefer a more down-to-earth approach, and will be quite happy to relate to the Dharma as the written teachings. But for those who think more in terms of symbols and images than words and concepts, this way of seeing the Dharma can bring a greater depth to our Going for Refuge. And even for the most rationalistic a little of this approach can be helpful. If we can relate to the Dharma imaginatively in this way, our Going for Refuge to the Dharma becomes a commitment to be responsive to the promptings of what is higher in the universe and in ourselves, whatever form this takes - whether this be an intuitive sense of faith, a heartfelt response to a Buddhist image or mantra, our admiration of a spiritually developed person, or our strong sense of rightness and certainty about a piece of Dharma expressed in words.

What Going for Refuge to the Dharma is not

Not limited to one formulation

The Dharma is mainly a set of methods for spiritual growth, rather than a statement about the nature of reality. The Buddha was very reluctant to say much about reality or Enlightenment, knowing that people would only misunderstand if they had not experienced it for themselves. Nevertheless, we humans need some basic statements about the nature of truth to put us on the right track. So the Buddha did on occasions try to convey certain truths about reality in words – although these usually related to the human condition rather than to abstract metaphysics.

The Four Noble Truths, which we looked at last week as a basic formulation that in some ways underlies the whole Dharma, are one such statement. But no set of words or ideas can ever truly communicate Enlightenment, and even the Four Noble Truths are no exception. The Four Noble Truths give us a concise and helpful concept to start us off, but in our desire for understanding and clarity we must not think that they, or any other idea expressed in words, could ever sum up the Dharma. The Four Noble Truths just express one angle on Enlightenment, the fact that it is the ultimate cure for dissatisfaction. But the Buddhist tradition makes it clear that Enlightenment is much more than that. Certainly, when we get close to Enlightenment we will rise above all suffering and dissatisfaction. We will experience true happiness, even bliss. But that does not begin to fully describe what it would be like. In reality Enlightenment is a higher state of being with many dimensions, arrived at by a process of growth and evolution, and it is quite beyond our present imagination.

Not dogmatism or fundamentalism

So Going for Refuge to the Dharma does not mean blind faith or dogmatism. Neither does it mean accepting uncritically everything that is in the Buddhist scriptures. The scriptures were passed down as an oral tradition for hundreds of years, then written down and copied over and over, as well as being translated from one language to another. In the process parts were no doubt left out or added, and parts were misunderstood and distorted. So we need to check the written words against experience – we need to ask, ‘what actually works’? This is another reason why we need to practice within a living tradition, learning from other people who have

\(^4\) Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Creative Meditation and Multidimensional Consciousness.*
been practising longer than we have, who have had a chance to find out from experience what works in our situation, and who in their turn learned from others before them.

 질문과 반성

1. Has practising the Dharma had a positive effect on you so far? What practices or teachings have had most effect?

2. Which aspects of the Dharma do you have most confidence in? Which parts are you sure are right?

3. If you were to sum up your commitment to the Dharma in a few points you are committed to practising on a daily basis, what would these be?

4. Are there any aspects of the Dharma that particularly inspire you?

5. How do you relate to the idea that the Dharma can also be communicated through symbols and images? Have any symbols or images had an effect on you? Are there any other ways the Dharma can be communicated?
Introduction
The Triratna Buddhist Community has a strong tradition of emphasising the crucial importance of the spiritual community, or Sangha. Experience shows that we need the Sangha to practice effectively. The people we mix with have a profound effect on us. We need the support and encouragement of like-minded people. We need advice and inspiration from people who are somewhat further along the path. And we need a social context of trust, honesty, and friendship if we are to open up and develop the emotional warmth that is an essential part of spiritual development. This crucial importance of the Sangha has always been recognised in Buddhism, and in these individualistic times it is more important than ever.

So the Sangha is important as a means to an end – the end being our own spiritual progress. But it is also important as an end in itself. For many people the most attractive thing about being a Buddhist is the Sangha itself. And the ideal of helping to build a community of people who relate to each other on the basis of warmth, generosity, and openness can be one of the most inspiring aspects of the spiritual life.

The texts covered in the last two sessions of Part 1 of the course are meant to bring out these two aspects of Sangha. In the first, we look at a story from the Pali Canon that illustrates the need for a spiritual friendship as an essential part of our own development – and gives us a clear warning against spiritual individualism. In the last session two modern Buddhists use some other characters from the Pali Canon to illustrate how the ideal of Sangha can be an inspiring goal in its own right.

‘Sangha as a means to an end: the story of Meghiya’
Text from The Udāna, The Meghiya Chapter, based on the translations of Woodward and Ireland.

‘Thus have I heard. Once the Buddha was staying at Cālikā, on Cālikā Hill. Now on that occasion the venerable Meghiya was in attendance on the Buddha. The venerable Meghiya came to the Buddha, saluted him, stood at one side, and said to the Exalted One:

“I desire, sir, to go to Jantu village for alms food.”

“Do whatever you think it is time for, Meghiya.”

So the venerable Meghiya, robing himself and taking his bowl and robe, went to Jantu village in search of alms food, and after making his rounds and eating his meal he went towards the bank of the river Kimikālā. And on reaching it, while taking exercise by walking up and down, he saw a lovely, delightful mango-grove. At the sight of it he thought:
“Truly lovely and delightful is this mango-grove! Surely this would be a good place for a clansman to work on his meditation. If the Exalted One will give me leave, I would like to come here to this mango-grove to practice meditation.”

So the venerable Meghiya went to the Exalted One and sat down at one side, and told the Exalted One what he had thought, saying:

“If the Exalted One will give me leave, I would like to go to that mango-grove to practice meditation.”

At these words the Exalted One said to the venerable Meghiya:

“Wait a little, Meghiya. I am alone until some other monk arrives.”

Then a second time the venerable Meghiya said to the Exalted One:

“Sir, the Exalted One has nothing more to do, he has nothing more to add to what he has done. But for me, sir, there is more yet to be done, there is more to be added to what I have done. If the Exalted One will give me leave, I would like to go to that mango-grove to practice meditation.”

Then a second time the Exalted One replied:

“Wait a little, Meghiya. I am alone until some other monk arrives.”

Then yet a third time the venerable Meghiya made his request, and the Exalted One replied:

“Well, Meghiya, what can I say when you talk of practising meditation? Do what you think it is time for, Meghiya.”

So the venerable Meghiya rose from his seat, saluted the Exalted One, and went to that mango-grove, and on reaching it he plunged into it and sat down at the foot of a tree. But while Meghiya was staying in that mango-grove there habitually came upon him three unskilful forms of thought, namely, lustful thoughts, malicious thoughts, and harmful thoughts. Then the venerable Meghiya thought:

“This is certainly strange! This is certainly surprising, that I, who went forth from home to the homeless life so full of faith, should be assailed by these unskilful forms of thought, namely, lustful thoughts, malicious thoughts, and harmful thoughts!”

So he left his solitude and went to the Exalted One, and said:

“Sir, while I was staying in that mango-grove there habitually came upon me three unskilful forms of thought. Then, sir, I thought: This is certainly strange! This is surprising, that I should be assailed in this way!”

The Buddha replied:

“Meghiya, when the heart’s release is immature, five things lead to its maturity. What are these five?
Meghiya, a monk needs spiritual friends, good associates, he needs the companionship of good people. When the heart's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the first thing that leads to its maturity.

Then again, Meghiya, a monk should be virtuous, keeping to his vows, practising ethical behaviour, seeing danger even in small faults, training himself in the precepts. When the heart's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the second thing that leads to its maturity.

Then again, Meghiya, a monk should be surrounded by talk that is serious and opens up the heart, that conduces to detachment, to dispassion, to calm, to understanding, to insight, to nibbāna; that is to say, talk about having few wants, about contentment, about avoiding worldly company, about arousing energy; talk about ethics, meditation and wisdom; talk about liberation, knowledge and insight. When the heart's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the third thing that leads to its maturity.

Then again, Meghiya, a monk needs to be firm and energetic in abandoning what is unskilful and acquiring what is skilful. He should be stout and strong in effort, not laying aside the burden of pursuing what is skilful. When the heart's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the fourth thing that leads to its maturity.

Finally, Meghiya, a monk should have insight, he should be endowed with the penetrating insight that sees all things rise and fall, and leads to the end of suffering. When the heart's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the fifth thing that leads to its maturity.

Now, Meghiya, a monk who has spiritual friendship can be expected to become virtuous, he will keep to his vows, he will practice ethical behaviour, he will see danger even in small faults, he will train himself in the precepts. Also Meghiya, a monk who has spiritual friendship will be surrounded by talk that is serious, about meditation, insight and liberation. And again Meghiya, a monk who has spiritual friendship can be expected to be firm and energetic in abandoning what is unskilful and acquiring what is skilful. And finally, Meghiya, a monk who has spiritual friendship can be expected to develop the penetrating insight that leads to the end of suffering.'

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What can we deduce about Meghiya’s character from this story?

2. Why do you think that Meghiya is plagued by unskilful thoughts when he is alone in the mango grove?

3. Why is he so surprised by this? Why didn't this happen when he was with the Buddha?

4. What is the connection between spiritual friendship and the other conditions that the Buddha says lead to “the heart’s release”? (You could draw a diagram of how these lead to each other.)

5. Meghiya learned a valuable lesson from his ‘bad’ meditations, about how the conditions in which we live affect our meditation practice. How could we reorganise our lives to improve our meditation practice?
The ‘horizontal’ dimension of spiritual friendship
Text abridged from Buddhism and Friendship, Subhuti with Subhamati, Chapter 2: One in Mind: Friendship as the Goal.

In the story of Meghiya, we see his selfishness and naivety contrasted with the Buddha’s tactful wisdom. In this sense the friendship we are shown is unequal, for one of the partners is spiritually more advanced than the other. This is an important kind of spiritual friendship, but it is not the only one.

There is also a kind of friendship that exists between those who are approximately on the same level. These friends are like spiritual brothers or sisters, or, if you prefer, fellow wayfarers. Although friends of this kind are more easily found than guides, they too are precious. The spiritual path is long, arduous, and easily lost. Our guide, if we are lucky enough to have one, is likely to have many other claims on his or her attention, and won’t always be at hand to resolve our doubts, revive our flagging spirits, or steer us past the byways that tempt our erring feet. It is important to have not just a guide but also companions on the path. Such companions represent the ‘horizontal’ dimension of spiritual friendship.

In Buddhism spiritual friendship (kalyāṇa mitratā) was originally understood to include not only teacher-disciple relationships, but also any friendship between good people who revere the Buddha and his Dharma. This emerges clearly from, for example, the Buddha’s teaching to the lay disciple Dighajanu:

\[ \text{And what is friendship [kalyāṇa mitratā]? Here... in whatever village or town a family man dwells, he associates with householders or their sons, whether young or old, who are of mature virtue, generosity and wisdom; he converses with them and engages in discussion with them. He emulates them in regard to their accomplishment in faith, virtue, generosity, and wisdom. This is called good friendship.} \]

Although these words were spoken to a layman, we should not conclude that horizontal friendship was only relevant to lay disciples. One could ask for no better example of it than the friendship between Sāriputta and Moggallāna, who were foremost among the Buddha’s monks. For me the most interesting aspect of their relationship is that Sāriputta and Moggallāna remained friends even after their Enlightenment. It seems that friendship belongs not only to the path but also to the goal of the spiritual life. It is important to grasp this point, because when we understand spiritual friendship only in terms of the path, we are in danger of cultivating friendship not for itself, but ‘for the sake of my spiritual development’. Thinking in this way, we could end up thinking of our friends as ‘equipment’ in the service of our own spiritual ambitions, in which case they wouldn’t really be friends at all. We can only
experience genuine friendship when we see it as an end in itself, or at least as an intrinsic part of some larger end.

### Three Friends
The vision of friendship as part of the goal is expressed in a *sutta* (or discourse), which tells the moving story of Anuruddha and his friends.

Anuruddha, Nandiya and Kimbila are staying together in a quiet forest grove, where the Buddha goes to visit them one evening, after emerging from solitary meditation. On becoming aware of their teacher’s arrival, the three monks hasten to welcome him, one relieving him of his bowl and outer robe, another making a seat ready, the third bringing water to bathe his feet. When they are all seated the Buddha first checks that they are in good health and adequately supplied with food. He then begins to ask them about their way of life together. His first question is, in essence, whether they get on well with one another. Anuruddha confirms that he and the other two are ‘living in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes.’

The Buddha (who knows very well that not all his monks get along so cordially) enquires how they manage to do so. Anuruddha explains that he considers himself fortunate to be living the spiritual life together with such companions as Nandiya and Kimbila. To do so is, in his opinion, a ‘great gain’ for him. The way they live together is an expression of mettā. Accordingly he maintains a positive attitude towards the other two in every possible way - kindly deeds, affectionate speech, and loving thoughts. Anuruddha’s words suggest that he has been developing mettā towards his companions as a practice, something nurtured through mindfulness, a conscious part of the spiritual life.

However what began as a practice has now become second nature. He has reached the point of routinely putting the others’ desires before his own. He simply asks himself, ‘Why should I not set aside what I wish to do, and do what others wish to do?’ And then he does precisely that. In conclusion, he tells the Buddha, ‘We are different in body, venerable sir, but one in mind.’

Nandiya and Kimbila, for their part, reply to the Buddha in the same way, each saying that he has surrendered his own inclinations and is living according to the will of the other two. They all agree that they are ‘different in body, but one in mind.’ As they have all given up their wills to each other, there is no question of one dominating the other two. It seems that they experience a shared will, or rather a mysterious coincidence of wills, based on a deep mutual awareness and harmony.

The Buddha expresses his approval of the three friends’ way of life, and enquires what spiritual fruits it has produced. He asks them, ‘But while you abide thus… have you attained any superhuman state, a distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones?’ Replying on behalf of the others, Anuruddha now reveals that that all three of them have passed through the whole range of spiritual and transcendental attainments. In other words they are all Arahants - fully Enlightened. The Buddha is delighted by this wonderful news.

Eventually, after some further talk, he leaves them. At this point, Nandiya and Kimbila have a question for Anuruddha: ‘Have we ever told you that we have achieved all those things that you have credited us with?’ In reply Anuruddha admits that the other two have never actually told him as much. Nevertheless he knows their ‘abidings and attainments’ by ‘encompassing’ their minds with his own. In other words, he has direct knowledge of their inner states, without any need for words. The fact that Anuruddha can speak confidently of Nandiya’s and Kimbila’s spiritual attainments, without having heard anything on the subject, suggests that
the expression ‘one in mind’ is not just a figure of speech, but more literally true than we might have guessed.

The story of the three friends shows us spiritual friendship as simultaneously belonging to the path and the goal. Indeed, the discourse seems to suggest that there is a kind of ascending spiral, in which a life lived in friendship leads upwards to spiritual realization, which in turn bears the fruit of deeper friendship and fuller mutual communion.

**Sangha as networks of friendship**

In the example of Anuruddha, Nandiya, and Kimbila, we see kalyāṇa mitrātā uniting a group of three disciples so that they form a circle of friendship. This reminds us that, while friendship is essentially a relationship between two people, it is by no means an exclusive relationship. A friend is free to have other friends, and two friends may have mutual friends. Among people who are committed to the same spiritual ideal, this interlocking pattern of friendship is the natural state of affairs.

It seems to me that such a network of spiritual friends, united by their common orientation to the Buddha and the Dharma, is intrinsic to the meaning of what Buddhists call sangha. The word sangha signifies the Buddhist spiritual community. It is often said or implied that only monks count as part of the sangha. Actually it would be more correct to say that monks constitute one section of the spiritual community. Tradition also recognises a wider mahā-sangha or ‘great community’, including the Buddha’s lay disciples.

Friendship is intrinsic to the meaning of sangha. It is not usually possible (even within a single locality) for every member of the sangha to be a personal friend of every other. Nevertheless it seems to me that an individual only truly participates in the sangha by means of friendship with at least some of its members.

The friendships that make up a sangha naturally tend to grow. They grow in depth as friends get to know each other better, and as they tread more and more of the spiritual path in one another’s company. Such friendships also tend to grow in number: new friendships are formed within the existing sangha, and the sangha naturally attracts new members. The real growth of a sangha consists in the entry of individuals into this web of friendships.

The description of the life of Anuruddha and his friends offers a kind of snapshot of an ideal sangha in miniature. To participate in the Sangha (at its highest) is to lead a life like that shared by these three: to dwell in such harmony with spiritual friends as to become ‘one in mind’ with them. This is indeed a high ideal - perhaps one that we don’t find easy to imagine as a living reality. But while the loftiness of the ideal may be a little daunting, it does serve to show clearly the direction in which we need to go if we want to know for ourselves the deeper meaning of sangha.

**The Three Jewels**

The enlightened members of the spiritual community, such as Anuruddha and his two friends, are a kind of higher Sangha within the sangha. This higher Sangha (sometimes distinguished by writing it with a capital S) is in fact one of the Three Jewels, the three most precious things in Buddhism, along with the Buddha and the Dharma.

The fact that Buddhism chooses to honour three things as centrally important suggests that the essential core of Buddhism cannot be satisfactorily encapsulated in a single image or idea, and that we will only understand it when we have looked at it from three viewpoints -
viewing it ‘in the round’ so to speak. The Buddha jewel represents the spiritual ideal as embodied in a human individual. The Dharma jewel is the spiritual ideal viewed in the abstract as ultimate truth and spiritual means. The Sangha jewel is the spiritual ideal as embodied in those who are advanced on the spiritual path. But I think we will miss the full significance of the Sangha jewel if we think of it merely as a category or class of individuals. To my mind the Sangha (with or without a capital S) is a living organism, and its lifeblood is spiritual friendship.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What was your first impression of the Buddhists you met when you went along to a Buddhist Centre? How important was this in your decision to get more involved?

2. What qualities do you particularly value (or not!) about the Sangha you have come into contact with so far?

3. Do you notice a difference in the quality of the friendships you see among Buddhists, as compared to most other people?

4. Do you find the idea of being ‘many in body, but one in mind’ attractive, or unattractive. Do you think it would be possible to be like this without sacrificing your individuality?

5. How important is the Sangha to you, as a factor in your becoming a Buddhist?

6. Having gone into a bit more depth about each of the Three Jewels over the last few weeks, which do you find most inspiring or important to you now?