

FWBO Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 1: Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels

Week 6: The Buddha (4) – 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 unskillful 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 unskillfully 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 Bāvāri lives on the banks of the River Godhāvāri). ‘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 Bāvāri, 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 Bāvāri, ‘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 Āḷavi-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 Piṅgiya's praises the Buddha seems to speak to Piṅgiya, although physically he is many miles away. How do you interpret this?