

1

FWBO Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 5: Buddhism and the FWBO, Devotional Practice

Week 2: The FWBO and the Unity of Buddhism

Introduction

In the last session we explored the diversity of the Buddhist tradition, especially the three ‘yānas’ – the ‘ways’ or ‘vehicles’ into which it has become divided. In this session we will look at the unity behind these different manifestations of the Dharma. In particular we will explore the vision of the unity of Buddhism that has motivated Sangharakshita – the founder of the FWBO – to set up a new, non-sectarian Buddhist movement for the modern world.

The Unity of Buddhism

(Text condensed from ‘Sangharakshita, a New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition’, by Subhuti, Chapter 2. All quotes are from Sangharakshita unless otherwise specified.)

Sangharakshita and the unity of Buddhism

Sangharakshita’s first published work on Buddhism, written at the age of eighteen, was an article on ‘The Unity of Buddhism’, published in June 1944 in the journal of the London Buddhist Society (now the Middle Way.) An understanding of this unity might seem fundamental, but it has not always been shared by all Buddhists. This is not surprising. In the elaboration of the Buddha’s original teaching by the different schools, quite diverse, even contrary, teachings and practices arose. Those divergences were then compounded by transmission through the various cultures of Asia. It has not been easy to see all Buddhism’s many manifestations as equally striving for the same transcendental goal. Buddhists have therefore often identified the Dharma with their own particular brand.

From the very outset of his career as a Buddhist, Sangharakshita did not identify with any particular school or conceive of Buddhism in terms of any one of its many cultural forms. This perspective gave him the freedom of the entire Buddhist tradition. He could draw sustenance and inspiration from whatever source was available to him, according to his unfolding spiritual needs.

Until he settled in Kalimpong almost all the Buddhists he met were Theravādins. When he came to seek ordination, without really considering the matter, it was to the Theravada that he looked. For him, ordination represented complete dedication to the Buddhist path, and acceptance into the Buddhist community as a whole. However from his arrival in the East, he began to form reservations about the Theravada School. He had a great love and respect for the Pāli Canon, but he saw that modern Theravādins, with a few notable exceptions, showed little spiritual vitality. Buddhism in Sri Lanka ‘seemed dead, or at least asleep’.

In Kalimpong, Sangharakshita wore the yellow robe and was in friendly contact with many Theravādin monks from various countries. He was forced, however, to look to other sources for his spiritual inspiration. His first years on his own, ‘working for the good of Buddhism’, were exceptionally difficult. He derived no support from the order to which he belonged. His guidance and support were to come not from any earthly agency but from that sublime ideal of the Bodhisattva, which is the very heart of Mahāyāna Buddhism. From the time of discovering that he was a Buddhist this ideal had inspired him. It came now to have a deeper and more powerful influence on him in his present spiritual isolation. In 1962 he took from Dhardo Rimpoche the sixty-four Bodhisattva vows that constitute the Bodhisattva ordination. This Gelugpa ‘incarnate lama’ had become his close friend and teacher, and Sangharakshita had come to revere him as a living Bodhisattva.

During his stay in Kalimpong Sangharakshita could meet many Tibetan teachers and study Tibetan Buddhism at first hand. He was strongly attracted to its rich symbolic world. From 1956 onwards he received several Tantric initiations from prominent Tibetan lamas and practised Vajrayāna meditation, as well as studying the Vajrayāna extensively. He also gained considerable guidance from a Chinese hermit living in Kalimpong who was well versed in Ch’an (Chinese Zen), thus giving him first hand knowledge of that important tradition.

On his return to England in 1964 Sangharakshita did what he could to promote an understanding of the entire tradition, giving series of talks on Tibetan Buddhism and on Zen. However, he antagonised some of the trustees of the Hampstead Buddhist Vihāra, which was his base. They tended to support a particularly narrow and puritanical brand of Theravada Buddhism. He taught from the entire Buddhist tradition and not exclusively from the Theravada. He banned a form of meditation, dear to a leading trustee, when he saw that it was causing some people severe mental disturbance. He did not keep austere aloof, but valued friendship and intimacy. He went to the theatre and the opera a few times. He did not keep his hair completely shaved, but let it grow an inch or two in the fashion of Tibetan monks. He did not always wear his robes! His failure to operate within the narrow confines of what some of the trustees thought a Theravada monk should teach and do led to his being excluded from the Vihāra in 1967.

In many ways his exclusion was a relief: he was free to start afresh. Now a new movement could be started that was simply Buddhist, based on the fundamental principles of the Dharma and open to the entire Buddhist tradition. In this new phase of his work, the most important of his life, Sangharakshita no longer had to follow outworn cultural patterns. The movement he set out to create would be the direct expression of his understanding of Buddhism’s essential principles. One of the most important of those principles is the unity of Buddhism.

How to define ‘Dharma’

Buddhism is founded on the Buddha’s experience of Enlightenment, his direct understanding of the true nature of things. But however united all schools may be in their ultimate source and goal, their doctrines and methods vary considerably. This poses an enormous problem. How are we to decide which are genuinely

Buddhist and which are not? Sangharakshita looks to the Buddha's own words for a resolution of this problem. The Dharma is defined by the Buddha in the earliest scriptures in purely pragmatic terms.

‘Whatever teachings conduce...to detachment not to bondage, to frugality not to covetousness... to contentment not to discontent ...to energy not to sluggishness, to delight in good not delight in evil.... This is the Dharma... This is the Master's Message.’

The Dharma is a means to an end. What determines whether a school or teaching is truly Buddhist is not that it contains some particular set of words, practices, customs, or institutions, but that it helps individuals to move towards Enlightenment.

How to understand the diversity?

Although we may know the general criterion by which to test whether a teaching is truly Buddhist, it is not so easy in practice to untangle the immense and sometimes conflicting diversity of Buddhist schools. Modern Buddhists are faced with the whole range of Buddhist traditions. How are they to evaluate it? How are they to use it?

In this respect they receive little help from Buddhists of the past. The more sectarian among both ancient and modern Buddhists have believed that all schools but their own are deviations from the Buddha's teaching. The more sophisticated – and charitable – approach has been to see all known schools as deriving directly from the Buddha himself. Each school, according to these systems, is seen as enshrining either a particular phase in the Buddha's teaching or else his response to people at a particular level of development. This approach is exemplified by early Chinese Buddhists, who were confronted with the problem of reconciling diverse teachings from the entire existing range of Indian Buddhism. They therefore classified the stages of the path according to the order in which they thought the Buddha had revealed the various scriptures. The Tibetans too inherited the vast range of Indian Buddhist teachings. They regarded the Buddha as having taught the three great phases of Indian Buddhism – Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna – to beings of inferior, middling, and superior capacity respectively. The Chinese and the Tibetan perspectives really amount to the same: that the different traditions all embody different aspects of the Buddha's actual, historical teaching, the higher teachings being those revealed to disciples at the highest stages of the spiritual path.

Modern scholarship has led Sangharakshita to a new perspective on the Buddhist tradition. He accepts that many teachings attributed to the Buddha were probably not actually taught by him. As each school's doctrine developed over the centuries, new creations were fathered on the Buddha, to give them the authority of his name. Nonetheless, the fact that these doctrines were probably not taught by the Buddha does not lessen their possible value as means to Enlightenment – by the Buddha's own criterion, they may be ‘the Master's Message’.

‘Basic Buddhism’ and the evolution of the yānas

Nonetheless there is found in the scriptures of all schools, and therefore pre-dating their division from each other, a core of common material. This common core contains what Sangharakshita calls ‘Basic Buddhism’: all the classic formulae of Buddhist doctrine such as conditioned co-production, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Three Characteristics. These are the basic teachings of Buddhism, contained in the oldest texts of all schools and accepted by all Buddhists.

Basic Buddhism is as near as we can get to the original teaching of the Buddha. However, even within the earliest scriptures some evolution can be discerned. Textual analysis reveals that some portions are earlier than others, and behind them we can sense what Sangharakshita has called ‘pre-Buddhist Buddhism’: Buddhism, in the period immediately following the Buddha’s Enlightenment, before he had developed the doctrines and institutions later identified as Buddhism. Behind these texts we catch a glimpse of the Buddha not as a polished churchman giving scholarly talks, but more like a wild shaman in the vast and lonely jungle, as yet with few words to convey his new and vital message.

However, gradually the Buddha did develop the teachings of Basic Buddhism; he gradually evolved a body of teachings and a spiritual community that directly expressed his Enlightened experience. This is Buddhism at its most unified and harmonious. Whatever their temperaments or personal inclinations, under the Buddha’s influence all his disciples felt themselves to be members of a single spiritual community, following a single path to a single goal. Sangharakshita calls this period of harmony ‘Archaic Buddhism’, which lasted for about 100 years.

During this era of the Buddha’s immediate personal influence, elements of all the later developments in Buddhism are discernible. Out of tendencies present in the Buddha’s own teachings gradually emerged new teachings and practices. This is, argues Sangharakshita, a natural and healthy phenomenon. Spiritual life is rich and multifaceted and it is impossible to exhaust every dimension and aspect of it. Different disciples and groups of disciples developed different tendencies latent in the original teaching, elaborating them more fully and working out their implications.

Hence diversity developed to respond to the spiritual needs of different people. Buddhism was also spreading into new geographical areas, and conditions were constantly changing. The Dharma had to be communicated appropriately in new cultural and historical circumstances, for it is not a static set of words, fixed for all time; it is a living communication between the Enlightened and the unenlightened that must constantly be renewed and related to the people to whom it is directed, as the Buddha clearly saw.

But in elaborating particular aspects of the Dharma, a sense of the integrity of the teachings would often be lost and a one-sidedness would develop. Those following the different trends of the original teachings began to diverge more and more from

one another, gradually hardening into distinct schools. As time went on, there were increasing debates and controversies between the different schools.

The Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna were the three main trends in the unfoldment of the latent tendencies within Archaic Buddhism, each of which enjoyed a period of roughly 500 years of dominance. The Hīnayāna unfolded the ethical dimension of the Buddha's teaching through its emphasis on monastic life. The Mahāyāna, building on traditions going back to the Buddha, brought out the devotional side of spiritual life, through meditation on the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. On the doctrinal side, it elaborated the metaphysical implications of the Dharma. Finally, the Vajrayāna took the imaginative and mythic aspects of the original teaching and, based on Mahāyāna metaphysics, developed a language of ritual and symbol.

The process of unfoldment was not, of course, as tidy and self-conscious as this description suggests. All the tendencies were present from the beginning. One can't separate the yānas completely. Even though one was dominant, the others were present. The spirit of those latent tendencies within the original teaching was kept alive among groups of disciples and their successors. Under particular circumstances, the tendencies were gradually made explicit in texts, doctrines, and practices, to which later the terms 'Mahāyāna' or 'Vajrayāna' would be applied. But these were not, in the early stages of their evolution, seen as completely separate.

Buddhism had died out in India by the fourteenth century. However, it had, by then, been dispersed throughout Asia. The forms of Buddhism that have survived to the present are based on one or more aspects of Indian Buddhism, further developed within their new setting. There are three major geographical groupings of these surviving historical forms. These are: South-east Asian Buddhism, which is found in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, and which belongs to the Hīnayāna; Sino-Japanese Buddhism, which exists in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, and belongs to the combined Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, with the latter predominating, especially in Japan; and Tibetan Buddhism, which spread into Mongolia, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Ladakh, and combines Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna.

The yānas as polemical terms

The historical usage of the term yāna is value-neutral. It merely identifies three trends unfolding in Buddhist history. However the yānas may also be used as value judgements. Sangharakshita considers that this polemical usage of the yānas must be carefully separated from the historical. Not that there was not some truth in the historical Mahāyāna's criticisms of the historical Hīnayāna: he argues that at the time that the Mahāyāna was arising, the Hīnayāna schools had become conservative, literal-minded, scholastic, negative in their conception of nirvana and the Way, over-attached to the merely formal aspects of monasticism, and spiritually individualistic in the sense of being unconcerned with the spiritual welfare of others. However, these are not characteristics of the Hīnayāna as such but of Hīnayāna schools at a particular stage of development – or perhaps decay.

The same criticisms can also be levelled at various Mahāyānists or Vajrayānists in certain periods of their history.

For instance, the Mahāyāna and the Vajrayāna developed a scholasticism of their own, and some of the modern books on Vajrayāna from Tibetan sources are highly scholastic, and do not give a feeling for the spirit of the Vajrayāna. Similarly, individual Theravādins, while belonging to a Hīnayāna school, may have a large altruistic element in their practice, while individual practitioners in a Mahāyāna school may practice mainly for individual liberation.

The yānas as ‘crystallisations’ of the Dharma

To see the real significance of the succession of the different yānas we need to appreciate the distinction between the Dharma and Buddhism:

‘What tends to happen is that the Dharma as a purely spiritual phenomenon crystallises... into a system of methods and teachings which we call ‘Buddhism’.’

This crystallisation is, of course, essential if the Dharma is to be communicated to others. The process of crystallisation can be seen in three distinct phases in the evolution of each Buddhist school. First there is the direct and spontaneous affirmation of the Dharma. Then there is a phase of ‘tidying up’ through philosophical systematisation. Finally, scholasticism ensues. Around the teachings also accumulate patterns of behaviour, institutions, artistic expressions – eventually a whole culture. The fact that Buddhism has crystallised in one way – adequate for a certain time and for certain people – tends to prevent a different kind of crystallisation in the future. It is as though the options are limited by the original crystallisation. Buddhism eventually gets so weighed down by its cultural forms that even the most gifted teachers cannot make headway on behalf of the Dharma against what passes as Buddhism. Eventually the existing crystallisation must be shattered and a new and more spiritually dynamic pattern established.

The yānas as stages of the spiritual path

The usage of the yāna model that sees the yānas as stages of the spiritual path is the one that presents most problems for readers of Sangharakshita’s writings. His later thought here is definitely at odds with his earlier. Once he had encountered Tibetan triyāna [three-yāna] Buddhism he adopted its perspective. It was, after all, far more inclusive than the Theravādin perception of all other schools as degenerate. Tibetan Buddhism sees the three yānas as representing the three principal stages of the spiritual path. All three phases of the historical development of Indian Buddhism were made sense of in these terms. Sangharakshita characterises the yānas from this perspective as follows:

‘One could say that the keynote of the Hīnayāna is renunciation, of the Mahāyāna is altruism, and of the Vajrayāna is transformation. Renunciation in the sense of Going Forth from the world and from the group. And altruism because for oneself the distinction between self and others has lost

at least something of its significance. And then transformation because one sees that spiritual life doesn't involve disowning anything or separating oneself from anything, but simply of transforming one's natural energies of body, speech, and mind into more and more refined forms.'

According to this view, during any individual's spiritual career, taking place over many lifetimes, all three stages must be traversed. However, he has since come to the conclusion that the three yānas cannot be seen as a spiritual sequence. Clearly there are deeper and deeper levels of the spiritual path. However, we can't really equate them with the Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna in the traditional Tibetan sense. Sangharakshita values all three historical yānas equally. Each is the elaboration of aspects of the original teaching and represents a particular emphasis. Teachings that relate to the deepest levels of the path can be found in all three yānas.

We have already seen that there is a tendency for the original spiritual vitality of a manifestation of the Dharma to be lost as its crystallisations harden around it. But to Tibetan Buddhists all those crystallisations actually were the teachings of the Buddha. Having no idea of historical development, they could not reject them nor could they correct them, so they created what amounts to a myth. They saw the Buddha as having taught everything that had come down to them, for the sake of beings at various levels of attainment.

In Tibetan Buddhist schools the path of the three yānas is even further subdivided, in different ways by different schools. Some Chinese and Japanese masters similarly arranged the teachings in complex sequences. Sangharakshita uses the term 'ultra-ism' to describe the phenomenon of continuously adding further stages.

'A certain name is applied to the ultimate stage. But, after a while, this term comes to be taken rather literally and therefore comes to mean something less than it meant originally. So you now have to go beyond it with another term that indicates what the first term meant before its meaning became debased. You see this with the word arahant. In the Pāli texts [belonging to the earliest, Hīnayāna phase] arahant refers to one who has realized the highest truth by following the teaching of the Buddha. But in the Mahāyāna sūtras, because the whole notion of the arahant had become rather debased, you needed something that went beyond that. In this way there arose the Mahāyāna conception of the Bodhisattva.'

Sangharakshita considers that Western Buddhists cannot accept these traditional schematisations of the teachings. For a start, they have no basis in history since we know that the Buddha did not literally teach many of the later doctrines attributed to him. We can also see that the different schools do not fit into the classificatory schema. For instance, there are teachings in the Pāli Canon, supposedly belonging to the Hīnayāna, that are clearly directed to individuals at a very high level of attainment. At the same time, some teachings found in the 'higher' yānas of the Tibetan systems are actually quite elementary. For instance, Sangharakshita considers that some of the practices in the anuyoga-tantra of the Tibetan

Nyingmapa school are merely Indian hatha yoga exercises. Again, he says of Dzogchen, which is for the Nyingmapa the very highest stage of spiritual practice, that it actually boils down to a quite simple practice of mindfulness. He says of some teachings in the anuttarayoga-tantra, the summit of some Tibetan systems, that they are not really Buddhist at all, but rather unassimilated Hinduism.

Finally, these schema only account for the schools and teachings that were known to the systematisers. Modern Buddhists are faced with the entire range of Buddhist schools, ancient and modern. Since different schools have their own different classificatory systems, not only in Tibetan Buddhism but in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism too, there is a problem of reconciling the different systems. This would be extremely complex, perhaps impossible, and of doubtful spiritual value.

Back to basic Buddhism

It is better, Sangharakshita says, to set all these systems aside and go back to the original teachings, on top of which the later teachings have been stacked.

‘I think the stack has got so high we have just got to go back. Otherwise we have stack upon stack of practices which have superseded one another. So you might as well just drop all the later developments and go back to the original one, which is closer to the Buddha’s own times and to the Buddha himself. We can do that on account of our historical perspective, whereas formerly Buddhists couldn’t.’

One important reason for a return to basics is the avoidance of the dangers inherent in the hierarchical arrangement of teachings. Inevitably people want to move on to the highest stage, missing out the initial levels. Sangharakshita calls this ‘spiritual snobbism’ and says that it was as common among Tibetans as it now is among Westerners in Europe and America.

‘In Tibetan Buddhism you are supposed to go through all the yānas – the Nyingmapas have nine! Actually, people go through the first few yānas very quickly and really only ‘practise’ the last one!’

Taking the triyāna system literally leads to a serious distortion of spiritual life. Sangharakshita considers it safer and more spiritually efficacious to return to the essential principles of spiritual life embodied in the basic teachings. One needs no higher teachings beyond these. One simply needs to understand them ever more deeply and apply them ever more fully in one’s own life.

This does not mean discarding later developments. It means seeing them in the context of the earlier teachings. Sangharakshita views the entire later Buddhist tradition as filling out, amplifying and elaborating the Buddhas original teaching – but not as superseding it or adding higher stages.

Testing the teachings

Buddhism went through many twists and turns in its 2,500-year history. As well as many brilliant and spiritually efficacious new elaborations, there were also many degenerations and distortions. We must test individual teachings to see whether they do indeed conduce to the attainment of Enlightenment. This criterion has, however, its limitations: in the end, only the Enlightened can know what conduces to Enlightenment. The pragmatic criterion can be used to justify mere heterodoxy and indulgence. Some trends in Buddhist history have tended to emphasise adaptability more than faithfulness to the tradition, and this had led to degeneration.

Eventually the Mahāyāna carried liberalism to extremes and exalted the spirit above the letter of the teaching to such an extent that the latter was almost lost sight of and the Dharma deprived, at least on the mundane plane, of its distinctive individuality. The need to constantly find new ways of communicating the Dharma in new contexts must be balanced by a concern to keep alive what the Dharma really is. Teachings and practices must be evaluated in the light of the experience of the Enlightened.

Some guidance is to be found in the scriptures, which provide an important safeguard against excessive liberalism. There is a common core of material found in all the canons, predating the schools' separation from each other, which describes what we have called 'Basic Buddhism'. Even those parts that are later, and so less likely to have come directly from the Buddha, are for the most part entirely in the spirit of that earlier teaching. They are genuine elaborations of it, exploring themes opened up in the original teaching, unfolding more fully an aspect of the Dharma.

The scriptures act as a touchstone by which the validity of a teaching can be tested. It should be possible to see whether it is in the spirit of the basic teachings of Buddhism as expressed in the scriptures. To be valid a teaching should be congruous with the scriptures common to all schools, especially with the main formulations such as the Four Noble Truths and the Three Characteristics; and it should also be aligned with basic Buddhist definitions of Right View, for example, in not inclining to the extreme views of eternalism or nihilism.

These criteria ensure that the pragmatic definition of the Dharma as whatever conduces to Enlightenment is not used to give licence to self-indulgence and whim. The scriptures and the basic doctrinal formulae, emanating from the Enlightened mind, offer some means of ascertaining whether the new teaching is genuinely 'the Master's Message'.

The principles of a new Buddhist movement

Sangharakshita's understanding of the unity of Buddhism found practical application when he came to found the FWBO in 1967. The principles on which it should be formed were by then very clear to him. The first and most basic was that the new movement should help individuals to grow towards Enlightenment.

Teachings and practices were taken up because they worked. There was no question of simply continuing unthinkingly any one school or tradition in its existing form. Using the Buddha's pragmatic criteria for recognising the 'Master's Message', Sangharakshita built a body of teachings and practices – still growing and changing – which met the spiritual needs of his disciples. Since he viewed the entire Buddhist tradition as likely to contain valid means to Enlightenment, he could draw from any part of it whatever was appropriate to the present. This was no mere eclecticism, nor was it simply a matter of personal whim or preference. Teachings and practices were incorporated because they answered his disciples' definite spiritual needs.

Clearly it was not possible to take up every teaching of every school of Buddhism. Even within a single school there is far more material available than any individual could ever usefully take advantage of. There had to be a selection, based upon real spiritual needs. Indeed, as Sangharakshita pointed out that the FWBO is doing no more, in principle, than Eastern Buddhists do in the case of their own particular tradition. A Theravada monk, for example, will not familiarize himself with all the doctrines of the Theravada, nor will he practise all the forty methods of meditation described in the Visuddhimagga.

There was however a clear starting point. Sangharakshita saw the Buddhist tradition as consisting of elaborations and explications of the essential principles contained in the Buddha's original teaching. He therefore drew his main corpus of material from 'Basic Buddhism'. He considered that most of his disciples spiritual needs could be met by practising more and more deeply these fundamental teachings. He enjoined on his disciples the maxim, 'More and more of less and less', rather than trying to hurry on to teachings which are allegedly more advanced.

The emphasis on the basic teachings also ensured the 'orthodoxy' of the new movement. Any innovations or importations from other sources could be tested against these teachings that embody the Buddha's own expression of the Dharma. Thus, although the FWBO did not adhere to any traditional school of Buddhism, Sangharakshita ensured that it was entirely traditional. It was based upon the Buddha's own Enlightened experience and followed as fully as it could the spirit of his teaching. The movement he created was a living testimony to the unity of Buddhism.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Have you ever felt confused by the diversity of Buddhist teachings? Has reading this text made things seem clearer? In what way?
2. What is the difference between the Dharma and Buddhism?
3. 'Whatever teachings conduce...to detachment not to bondage, to frugality not to covetousness... to contentment not to discontent ...to energy not to sluggishness, to delight in good not delight in evil.... This is the Dharma...This is the Master's Message.' By these criteria, do you think

Buddhism has got a monopoly on the Dharma? If not, why do you think of yourself as a Buddhist rather than following another teaching that seems to meet these criteria?

4. Do you think that the fact that a Buddhist teaching did not come from the historical Buddha makes it less valid? How might you go about deciding whether you could trust such a teaching?
5. From your reading and study so far, can you see any examples of the tendencies explored and filled out by Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism already being present in the Buddhism described in the Pāli Canon?