

FWBO Dharma Training Course¹ for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 5: Buddhism and the FWBO, Devotional Practice

Week 4: Ritual and Devotion (1) – The Purpose of Ritual

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Introduction

As its name implies, the FWBO started life as a response to Western conditions, and an attempt to create a form of Buddhism suitable for people living in present-day Western cultures. When we first come across the FWBO, many of us from a ‘Western’ cultural background assume that creating a Western Buddhism will mean that the Dharma will be stripped of its ‘irrational’ elements – with devotional practice often first and foremost among these. We can then be surprised and even disappointed when we discover that devotional practice has an important place in the FWBO approach.

But there are good reasons why ritual and devotional practice – what we often call by the Sanskrit word *pūjā* – plays the part that it does in the FWBO. In the words of Sangharakshita:

‘Ritual is an integral part of Buddhism, and an integral part of every school of Buddhism, whether Tibetan, Zen, or Theravada. We cannot get away from ritual in Buddhism, nor should we try to do so. Instead we should try to understand ritual and see what its purpose is.’

In this session we will be doing just that – we will be seeking to understand the purpose of ritual, and to understand how engaging in it can help us to make spiritual progress.

“Rational Ritual”

Many of us have been conditioned by our cultural background to think of all ritual as somehow irrational. Certainly ritual can become empty and devoid of meaning, but as the psychologist Erich Fromm has pointed out, there is also such a thing as ‘rational ritual’ – ritual that serves a definite purpose, and is an effective way of achieving this purpose. Fromm described such rational ritual as “shared action, expressive of common strivings, rooted in shared values.” This description brings out several important aspects of ritual. Ritual is ‘expressive’ – it is a way of expressing our deepest aspirations and values, and in the process making them more conscious, and strengthening their power to guide our life and actions. Ritual is also often ‘shared’ (although we can engage in ritual on our own, and this can have a highly positive effect.) But when ritual is shared, with a number of people coming together to participate, it takes on another important dimension – it becomes a way to express and strengthen our sense of community with others who

have the same goal as ourselves. It becomes a way of creating Sangha, or spiritual community.

If we engage in it in the right spirit, ritual can help us to:

- discover and make conscious
- express
- strengthen

and remind us of our:

- admiration and reverence for what is higher than ourselves
- aspiration to make progress
- commitment to practice
- solidarity and comradeship with others engaged in the same project

Śraddhā

Admiration, aspiration and commitment are aspects of our śraddhā – an untranslatable Sanskrit word for an inner experience that can include all three of these elements, as well as confidence, and an intuitive sense of our direction in life. According to Sangharakshita, the Sanskrit word śraddhā comes from a root meaning ‘to place the heart upon.’ Śraddhā is what we feel for what we place our heart upon, for what has the deepest emotional meaning for us. But it is not just a feeling – it is the faculty that connects us with our deepest ideals and values.

Of course, not all ideals we might base our life on are of equal value. Someone might ‘place their heart on’ worldly ambition, or comfort and security, or the pursuit of sense pleasure, and make this the value that guides their life. This would not be śraddhā. Śraddhā is our response to ideals and values that are higher or deeper or more universal than the small concerns of our self as we are now. As Sangharakshita has said:

‘[Śraddhā is] a lifting up of the heart... you... have been lifted up to something higher, have touched something higher, have experienced, even if only for a moment, something higher.’

‘Faith, śraddhā, is... the real living response of the whole being... to something; we may not be able to have a very clear idea of it conceptually, intellectually, but something which we intuitively perceive, which we feel, if you like, is greater, and higher, and nobler, and more sublime, and more worthwhile, of higher value than ourselves as we are now. Something to which we ought as it were to dedicate ourselves, if you like surrender ourselves. Something for the sake of which we ought to live, even sacrifice ourselves.’

Although śraddhā is often translated as ‘faith’, it obviously does not just involve believing some dogma to be true, and it is certainly not ‘blind faith’. Śraddhā is often said to rest on three foundations – intuition, reason, and experience. We need to check our intuitive sense of our life’s direction with our reason, asking, does this make sense? We need to check our deep sense of attraction to the ideal against our experience, asking, does what I have seen with my own eyes confirm that what I am attracted to has a positive effect? But ultimately śraddhā goes beyond reason, and it goes beyond what we can confirm through our senses. It can sometimes be experienced almost physically, as a sense of rightness, clarity and certainty that is too deep for words. In Sangharakshita’s words again, śraddhā is ‘the response of what is ultimate in us to what is ultimate in the universe.’

In some traditional commentaries, three aspects of śraddhā are singled out: admiration for the ideal, longing for the ideal, and confidence that we can move towards the ideal. Śraddhā is said to bring many positive qualities, including clarity of mind, and a joyous serenity. It is said to be a part of every positive mental state, and it is an essential faculty if we want to progress along the path.

We all have an element of śraddhā, or we would never be able to commit ourselves to a positive course of action and carry it through. But śraddhā is a quality that can be developed, a faculty that becomes stronger through exercise, and developing this faculty is an important part of the spiritual life.

Discovery

Śraddhā is not particularly recognized or valued in our culture, and when we start practising the Dharma we are often out of touch with it. Very often we need first of all to discover our śraddhā – beginning with our admiration and reverence for something beyond ourselves. When we start to take part in Buddhist ritual we may begin to experience feelings that we were only dimly conscious of before, because they are not valued by our society or encouraged by our conditioning. Often people who at first feel some resistance to ritual find that, when they take part in it with an open mind, they feel things that they had not at all expected. In the act of repeating some verses, in bowing, in making an offering to a shrine, we can find that the action reaches down into our depths and releases feelings that we are completely unaware of – even that we deny – when we are merely sitting still and thinking. By acting rather than thinking, by engaging our whole being rather than just our intellect, we begin to subvert our inner censor, and discover parts of ourselves that we did not know existed.

And these are parts of ourselves that we need if we are to succeed with the spiritual life. Without śraddhā we can get nowhere. An integral part of śraddhā is admiration, and even longing – for an ideal that we aspire towards, for people who embody this ideal, for beautiful and noble qualities, and perhaps for something we cannot name that somehow underlies all these. Unless we admire and want these things, we will not have the motivation to move towards them. In the words of the Theravādin monk Nyaponika Thera:

‘One who is incapable of a reverential attitude will also be incapable of spiritual progress beyond the narrow limits of his present mental condition. One who is so blind as not to see and recognize anything higher and better than the little mud-pool of his petty self...will suffer for a long time from retarded growth. And one who... scorns a reverential attitude in himself and others will remain imprisoned in his self-conceit – a most formidable bar to a true maturity of character and to spiritual growth. It is by recognizing and honoring someone or something higher that one honors and enhances one’s own inner potentialities.’

That is putting it more strongly than most of us in the FWBO would probably choose to do, and should not be taken to mean that if we do not enjoy pūjā we are spiritual no-hopers. Even some committed practitioners are not much drawn to pūjā, and express their śraddhā in other ways. In the words of Sangharakshita:

‘If you have a developing interest in Buddhism but you are not drawn to pūjā, even having tried it a number of times, this not something to be worried about. You can practice meditation or engage in study. We are not all attracted to the same forms of practice. This is why within the FWBO we don't prescribe just one particular spiritual practice, as some Buddhist schools do. We make available a whole range of Buddhist activities, anything that will help at least some people to grow and develop. It is important, especially in the early stages of following the Buddhist path, to latch on to whichever form of practice seems most inspiring and helpful to you. Other aspects will develop later.’

What is important is śraddhā, not ritual itself. But for most people ritual is an essential way of developing śraddhā, as well as being an enjoyable element of practice in its own right, and for these reasons it is important to give it a fair trial.

Expression, to aspiration, to commitment

So pūjā is often the way we begin to discover our capacity for admiration and reverence. And as we begin to experience these emotions more strongly, it is quite natural that we should want to express them, and again pūjā is often the main way we do this. (If we love or respect a person, we naturally want to express this. The same is true of our love and respect for the Three Jewels.) And as we express our admiration, it grows still further. The more we express our feelings, the more they move out of the secret, twilight private world into the outer world of public reality. They become more real.

As our admiration becomes stronger and more real, it is natural that it should turn into an aspiration to move towards the ideal, to embody it in ourselves, even to serve it if we can. This aspiration then, in turn, quite naturally develops into commitment, a determination to do what is necessary to let our aspiration have an effect on our actions and our life. This is all part of the process of moving our deepest ideals from our inner world into the outer world, turning them from a hazy bright patch in our psyche into a powerful force in our lives.

Pūjā can be a great help in every step of this process. As we express our admiration, it becomes more conscious, stronger, and more real. It develops into aspiration. As we express our aspiration, it becomes more conscious, stronger, and more real. It develops into commitment. As we express our commitment – and especially when we make it public – it becomes a stronger force in our life. It becomes who we are and what our life is about, publicly as well as in the secrecy of our own mind. (Anyone who has made a public, ritual declaration of commitment about anything will testify that this can have a powerful effect – you may have noticed this with the commitment you made at your mitra ceremony.)

Another effect of pūjā is that it simply reminds us of our ideals, and of our commitment to them. We humans can feel genuinely committed to something in our better moments, when we are in touch with what is best in ourselves, but forget all about it when we are distracted by the rough-and-tumble of everyday life. We need to constantly reconnect, to remind ourselves of what really matters to us, if we want to make this an effective force in our lives. Regular daily practice of even simple rituals, such as bowing to our shrine and chanting the refuges and precepts before meditating, helps to remind us of our values and our commitment to them, so that we stay in touch with them throughout the day.

In all these ways the practice of ritual helps us make what started out as a dim intuition of our potential into the ruling principle that guides our actions and our life. Eventually it can give us all the benefits of a developed faculty of śraddhā – serenity, clarity, continuity of purpose, strength in the face of adversity, wide perspective, maturity, individuality, and peace of mind.

How to approach ritual

Ritual brings an element of colour, music, poetry, and theatre into our spiritual life. It is meant to be enjoyed, and it is important that we engage with it in that spirit. Buddhist ritual is not meant to be heavily solemn or darkly serious, it is meant to be joyful, and it can even be humorous at times. So enjoy pūjā. Enjoy the sound of the mantras and the rhythm of the chanting, matching and merging your voice with others to produce a harmonious sound. Enjoy taking part in ritual action with all the mindfulness and gracefulness of body that you can muster. Enjoy the images evoked by the words, using the imagination to conjure up the pictures and feelings they describe.

When we take part in a pūjā we are not signing up to any articles of belief. We may often be rehearsing attitudes and mental states that we aspire to, but that will be beyond us for some time to come, so we do not need to worry that the words we are saying do not always match our present state. Taking part in pūjā is like going to the theatre. When we see a play, we do not need to believe that what is happening on stage is literally true in order to engage with it, and to have our emotions transformed by it. We suspend disbelief, enjoy the experience, and let the play have its effect. We need to engage with pūjā in something of the same spirit – we suspend disbelief, engage our attention and our imagination as fully as we can, enjoy the experience, and let the ritual have its effect.

Expressing shared purpose

Pūjā can also be very enjoyable because it gives us a way of expressing and experiencing our sense of solidarity and comradeship with others on the path. We can consciously cultivate this aspect of ritual practice in several ways.

When we repeat verses or chant mantras, we can avoid an individualistic approach, not trying to be noticed, and instead making our contribution a harmonious part of a larger whole. So we listen closely to those around us, harmonizing and matching our volume, pace and rhythm with others, making our voice a synchronized part of something larger and richer. When we engage in ritual actions we can use this as an opportunity to express and cultivate a wordless rapport with others. In making offerings, for example, many people make a practice of being aware of the person next to them, and as far as possible matching their actions gracefully with the other, bowing when they bow, kneeling when they kneel, rising when they rise. When two people make offerings together with this approach it becomes a shared exercise in mindfulness and mutual consideration, and it can create a deep sense of wordless rapport with another practitioner – even with someone we never usually speak to.

Problems with pūjā

We have seen that the practice of pūjā should be enjoyable, and that it can bring great benefits. It is worth persevering with it, even if at first it seems strange, boring, or even distasteful. (Of course for many of us it seems none of these things, and is an enjoyable and fruitful part of practice from the start – if that is you, then you can probably skip this section.)

For those of us who do not at first respond to ritual practice, getting to like it is simply a matter of getting used to it, getting over the strangeness, and finding ways to engage the emotions with forms of words that may not suit our literary tastes. This just takes time, exposure, and a deepening understanding of the significance of the ritual practices used in our tradition. At first we may be inhibited by embarrassment about expressing unfashionable emotions like devotion in front of others. We fear we will look foolish, and our reserve and pride may get in the way. But this is usually overcome quite quickly, when we see that other people who are obviously strong and sane – and even admirable – are quite happy to express themselves in this way.

But some of us do experience negative reactions to ritual that go deeper than our usual caution about anything new and unusual. Such reactions can have a strong emotional flavour, which tells us that this is not just a question of not being much drawn to pūjā, but has its roots deep in our psychology or past experience. Some of the most common reasons for this sort of reaction are that:

- We associate ritual with a religion we have been deeply involved with and rejected

- We fear or reject the emotions that pūjā can evoke
- Taking part in pūjās with others sets off our reaction to groups and belonging

Associations with other religions

Often the first and second of these go together, particularly if we have experienced strong devotional feelings in the context of another spiritual tradition, which we have then rejected for rational reasons, because it does not make sense. We can then fear that devotional feelings will pull us back to an earlier, more easily manipulated, less adult state. But the fact that our śraddhā was once expressed through a medium that was perhaps not worthy of it does not invalidate our sense of reverence for something higher than ourselves as we currently are. What we need to do is to refine and educate our śraddhā, to check it against reason and experience, not to reject it altogether.

Nevertheless, in the case of a small number of people whose involvement with another tradition has been intense, the confused feelings brought up by taking part in pūjā can be overwhelmingly strong. If this is you it might be better to avoid pūjā for a while, or to only practice it in small trial doses, perhaps on your own, until you have more perspective on the feelings that it can evoke.

Reactions to groups

Probably a more common reason for strong negative reactions to pūjā is that it evokes feelings related to groups and belonging. Many of us at one time or another will have felt that joining in with a group of other people threatens our sense of our own individuality. This is a necessary and positive part of being an individual when the group is behaving unskillfully, but we may feel this even when others' behaviour is neutral or skilful. We feel the need to define ourselves as separate from any group, in order to establish and protect our sense of ourselves as self-determining individuals. For some of us this is a necessary stage in the task of becoming an individual, but it is not the last word. Once our sense of our own individuality is strong enough, we can join in with others while still being very much ourselves, like a musician who can happily play along with others without losing their part.

But meanwhile we may find that taking part in pūjā with others makes us feel like outsiders rather than strengthening our sense of solidarity with them. Everyone around us is taking part in something rather odd, that we perhaps do not fully understand, and we feel a pressure to go along with them that seems to threaten our individuality. We feel alienated, alone, perhaps rebellious, and perhaps superior.

In this case pūjā becomes an excellent opportunity to practice awareness, to become more conscious of the tendencies we need to work with, not just in pūjā, but in our life as a whole. When we practice ritual we have an opportunity to

become aware of – and integrate – feelings and reactions to groups that almost certainly affect our lives and our relationships in a host of other ways. We might get more leverage on these reactions by reflecting that nobody else cares whether we join in with a ritual or not – the sense of pressure to conform is in our mind. We might ask ourselves whether the others taking part are really such conformists – perhaps some of them seem like very strong individuals in most other ways. We might ask ourselves whether we have ever felt anything similar in other circumstances, or whether we generally tend to avoid joining with others, and whether we often seem to make ourselves a loner and an outsider.

Obviously this is not the main purpose of pūjā, but a valuable by-product of taking part in ritual can be that it helps us to become conscious of – and leave behind – reactions to groups that can limit us severely in many ways, preventing us from joining with others to change the world in positive ways, and shutting us off from the sense of shared purpose that is of deep friendship.

Pūjā is something to do

Pūjā is something to *do*, not something to think about or talk about. The only way we can judge its effects is to take part often enough to get over our initial unfamiliarity, as far as possible leaving our prejudices and preconceptions behind, so that we can experience the effects directly, for ourselves.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What was your first reaction to the idea of taking part in Buddhist ritual? Did any aspects of your past conditioning influence your attitude?
2. Under what circumstances in the past have you felt a sense of awe and reverence, or a sense of something higher than yourself as you are now? Can you learn anything from your past experience that could help you to cultivate this aspect of śraddhā in the future?
3. Try to describe what draws you towards:
 - a) the Buddha
 - b) the Dharma
 - c) the Sangha.
4. What first attracted you to each of them, and what attracts you now? How much of the attraction is based on reason and experience, and how much seems ‘too deep for words?’
5. What do you experience (positive and negative) when you take part in devotional practice? Does taking part in ritual affect your state of mind, and if so, how?

6. Do you think you could benefit by bringing more regular ritual into your practice? If so, how might you do this?