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FWBO Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

Part 5: Buddhism and the FWBO, Devotional Practice

Week 6: Ritual and Devotion (3) – The Tiratana Vandana

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Introduction

The Tiratana Vandana is a set of traditional Pāli verses of praise and respect for the Three Jewels. Tiratana means ‘Three Jewels’; vandana means salutation, respect, homage, veneration and worship. In the FWBO Pūjā Book Tiratana Vandana is translated as ‘Salutation to the Three Jewels’, but if the word ‘salutation’ does not mean much to you, you could just as well translate it as ‘Praise of the Three Jewels’, ‘Homage to the Three Jewels’, or even ‘Worship of the Three Jewels.’

The benefits of chanting

In the FWBO the Tiratana Vandana is often chanted before the morning meditation – although of course it can be performed at any time of day or night. Perhaps most people’s first experience of it is simply as a beautiful chant in a language we do not understand, that mysteriously seems to help us settle down to meditate. This simple act of chanting with others – even if we have only a very hazy idea of the meaning of the words – can be an excellent preparation for meditation. It requires attention and mindfulness, and the act of chanting with others takes us out of our tight focus on ourselves, which can be such an obstacle to meditation. The rhythm of the chant can help to relax us, its liveliness can wake us up, and its beauty can open us up to positive emotions and higher states. But to benefit fully from chanting the Tiratana Vandana we need to know the meaning of the words we are saying, so that – although we are chanting in Pāli – something of this meaning can perfume our minds as we chant.

Structure

The Tiratana Vandana is divided into three parts – relating to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – and each part consists of two sections. The first section on each Jewel lists some of its qualities, allowing us to call these qualities to mind and connect with our admiration for them. This act of calling positive qualities to mind and praising them is an essential prerequisite to respect and commitment – if we are not aware of something’s good qualities we have no basis for respecting and admiring them. In the second section on each Jewel this praise then moves on to become a desire to Go for Refuge. This second section is the same for each Refuge, with just one word altered – Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha – so that it serves as a repeated chorus in the chant. We will look at the three sections of praise to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha first, then explore the meaning of the ‘chorus’ that is repeated for each Jewel.

The Buddha

The Tiratana Vandana starts with same line as the Refuges and Precepts: ‘Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.’ As with the Refuges, the very first words – ‘namo tassa’, meaning ‘respectful salutations to him’ – calls to mind a physical gesture of respect, reminding us to place our hands together in the añjali mūdra. Bhagavato is often rendered into English as ‘Blessed One,’ but Sangharakshita has pointed out that the word has a host of connotations in Buddhism and in Indian culture. Bhagavato implies someone who stands out from everyone else, someone who has the highest spiritual qualities, someone awe-inspiring, someone sublime, someone auspicious. The Buddha is also ‘arahato’ – worthy or noble – and ‘sammāsambuddhassa’ – really and truly awake.

The next verse then emphasises the truth of what has been said: ‘Such indeed is he’ (‘Iti’pi so’). He really is like this. He truly is awake, while we are still asleep and dreaming; and because he is not compulsively chasing dream pleasures and running away from dream fears, he is free, while we are imprisoned by the delusional reality we experience. He is ‘equipped with knowledge (‘vijjā’) and practice (‘carana’).’ In other words his Insight is not merely an intellectual understanding – he walks his talk, and he is not like some intellectuals who spin a fine web of words, but whose lives are ruled by the same conventional worldly concerns as everybody else. He has attained to real happiness (‘sugato’), because he is living in reality, not in delusion. And he is the ‘Knower of the Worlds’ (‘loka-vidū’) – his vision is beyond anything we can conceive, beyond anything we can imagine .

For all these reasons he is ‘the Unsurpassed Guide of those to be tamed’ – ‘anuttaro purisa-damma sārati’. The Pāli word ‘purisa-damma’, which is translated as ‘men to be tamed’ in the Puja Book, according to Sangharakshita means something more like, ‘those who wish to be more controlled’, or perhaps even ‘people of the Dharma.’ We count ourselves as people who wish to be more controlled, and less in slavery to greed hatred and delusion; so he is the teacher we need to follow. He is ‘Unsurpassed’ or foremost, (‘anuttaro’), far above any other teacher, and therefore far more important to us than any currently fashionable writer or thinker.

These words in praise of the Buddha may mean something to us, or they may not bring up much in the way of an emotional response. We need to use our imagination to bring them to life, and to engage our emotions with them. We need to make an imaginative effort to conjure up for ourselves a Buddha who is not just an ordinary human being – even if he is more psychologically and emotionally ‘sorted out’ than most – but a being of a different order, someone who experiences a higher and truer reality, and is seeking to save us from our unnecessary suffering by opening our eyes to this different dimension of being. The Buddha is beyond our present experience, and imagination and faith are the faculties by which we can experience at least a glimmer of his nature. If we can experience something of this glimmer, then reverence and Refuge will follow naturally. If we cannot, our Buddha Refuge is likely to be half-hearted.

The Dharma

The second part of the Tiratana Vandana starts with a hymn in praise of the Dharma – ‘Dhamma’ in Pāli – in which we call to mind the positive qualities of the teaching, and our gratitude, respect and reverence for it. The teaching is described as ‘bhagavatā Dhammo’ – the Dharma of a Buddha, the teaching of ‘the Richly Endowed One.’ This is no ordinary teaching, on a par with the other systems of thought. In Sangharakshita’s words

‘The Dhamma [is] an expression in words... of the ultimate reality of things. The Dhamma as the Buddha's teaching ... [is] His communication of, His experience of, the ultimate reality of things. [It] is the Dhamma which has issued from the mind, or the spiritual realization, of a Buddha, a perfectly enlightened one, and not something which has been fabricated intellectually, or put together in an eclectic manner from sources.’

This is a teaching that comes from a higher dimension of being. It is a teaching worthy of reverence, to which we can honourably bow our heads; and it is not to be compared with any other teaching we may come across.

This Dharma is also ‘well communicated’ – ‘svākkhāto’ – and put into a form that we can understand, using not only rational discourse, but also parables, metaphors, and poetic imagery. We could relate this idea to our own experience, calling to mind the way the Dharma spoke to us when we first came across it, and recalling those teachings that particularly inspire us now.

The teaching is also ‘immediately apparent’ – ‘sanditṭhiko’. It has an observable effect, which we do not need to wait for the next life to experience. If we practice the metta bhavana, for example, we will notice an effect on our emotions and our relationships with others. If we go on retreat, our mental states will be altered. This is a matter of experience, not speculation. We could call to mind at this point the ways in which the Dharma has affected us, stimulating our faith that it will have ever greater effects in the future.

The Dharma is ‘perennial’ – ‘akāliko’, which means timeless, free from time, or outside of time. At one level this may point to the fact that the Dharma is like a message from a higher dimension of reality, a dimension that is outside of time. At a more down-to-earth level it means that the essence of the Dharma is true in any historical period and in any culture, even though it may be in conflict with the values and worldviews that happen to be fashionable in any particular era. To quote Sangharakshita again:

‘So the Dhamma is eternal in this sense, it's a truth that remains true irrespective of particular instances or circumstances. It's as valid now as it was in the Buddha's time. There are certain things that have got mixed up with the Dhamma historically, which were valid then, useful then, but not valid now, not useful now, that's a different matter. But the basic fundamental principles remain eternally true and eternally valid.’

The Dharma is also ‘of the nature of a personal invitation’ – ‘ehipassiko’. The Pāli ‘ehi’ literally means ‘come’, and ‘passiko’ means ‘see’. So it is the ‘come-and-see Dharma’. Nobody is forcing us to practice it. We are invited to try it out, to see if it works. We keep practicing because we know from experience that it does us good. We have benefitted from it in the past, and we expect to benefit in the future.

Then the Dharma is ‘Progressive’ – ‘opanayiko’. Opanayiko means leading forward or leading onward. The Dharma leads us forward step by step and stage by stage, opening our eyes gradually, as our whole inner being develops. It is a path of organic growth that is progressive and evolutionary, so it does not ask us to take on anything we are not ready for, and there are always practices we can do that suit our present condition.

Finally the Dharma is ‘to be understood individually by the wise’ – ‘paccatam veditabbo viññūhi’ti’. (‘Paccatam’ means ‘personally’; ‘veditabbo’ means ‘to be known’; ‘viññūhi’ti’ means ‘by those who are wise’, or ‘by those who understand.’) The Dharma is not a dogma we must accept on blind faith. We need to explore it, to understand it for ourselves, and to make it our own.

The Sangha

As with the Buddha and Dharma, the third part of the Tiratana Vandana opens with a number of epithets in praise of the third Jewel, the Sangha. The Sangha is referred to as ‘Bhagavato sāvakaṅgho’ – the spiritual community of those who are disciples of, those who are open to, the Buddha and his teaching. This Sangha is ‘happily proceeding’ – ‘supaṭipanno’. The members of this community proceed well and happily, treading a positive path, moving forward on a path of practice, and they are doing this happily. They are also ‘uprightly proceeding’ – ‘ujupatipanno’. ‘Uju’ means ‘straight’, so this could be taken to mean that the members of the Sangha are on the direct, straight path to spiritual progress; but the word ‘uprightly’ used in the translation seems to carry a strong hint of ethical uprightness, also implying that the Sangha proceeds ethically, with integrity and honesty, and with the upright dignity that an ethical life confers.

The Sangha are also ‘methodically proceeding’ – ‘ñāyapaṭipanno’. They practice systematically, according to a definite method, where each stage builds on what went before. In the words of Sangharakshita:

‘It suggests regular steps or systematically. For instance people who haven't done much in the way of meditation think that meditation means just sitting down and musing. But there is a method, a systematic technique almost, of getting concentrated, like counting the breaths or doing the mettā bhāvanā in a certain sequence of stages. There's a definite way of going about it, it's a practical thing. There are certain definite things to be done in a certain order. It doesn't just happen. So it's this which is covered by the word ‘ñāya’. You go about it methodically, systematically, in a practical sort of way, not just in a vague general dreamy kind of way. So the community of the Buddha's disciples are proceeding methodically, they're

taking concrete positive steps, in a methodical practical way, to ensure that they do develop. They don't just meditate, they do the mindfulness of breathing, or they do a visualization practice or they do the recollection of the elements; there's no such thing as just meditating, not unless you're very advanced and can just sit down and go into a higher state of consciousness. So one goes about it methodically.'

The final way in which the Sangha is said to be 'proceeding' is 'sāmicipaṭipano'. In our Puja Book this is translated as 'correctly proceeding', but in his seminar on the Tiratana Vandana, Sangharakshita gave a more inspiring interpretation – harmoniously proceeding, proceeding together, proceeding in harmony. We do not just practice the Dharma for our own spiritual progress, we practice to create a harmonious community, and this is essential to our development as individuals. Harmony among its members would be an important part of any adequate definition of the Sangha.

The possibly rather puzzling 'four pairs of individuals, these eight persons' ('cattāri purisayugāni, aṭṭha purisa puggalā') referred to in the translation are all those in whom an element of Insight has arisen, from the 'stream entrant' who has broken the first three fetters out of the ten that are traditionally said to bind us, and is now irreversibly destined for Enlightenment, up to the Arahants who have achieved complete liberation. This 'Ārya Sangha' or Noble Sangha is traditionally divided into four levels of progress according to the number of fetters broken, and as there are men and women at each level, we have four pairs of types of member of the Ārya Sangha, or eight types of person.

This fellowship of the Buddhas disciples is worthy of worship ('āhuneyyo'), worthy of hospitality ('pāhuneyyo'), worthy of offerings ('dakkhineyo'), and worthy of salutation. It is worthy to be bowed to with the hands held together in the añjali mudra ('añjalikaraniyo'). And the reason that these people are worthy of this level of respect is that they are 'an incomparable source of goodness to the world' – 'anuttaraṃ puññakhettaṃ lokassā'ti'.

At this point we could call to mind all the great figures of the Buddhist tradition, as well as all the unknown people who have made their own contribution, and we could include any present-day members of the Sangha we have a particular respect for. We could connect with our sense of gratitude for the great gift these people have given us, and perhaps imagine ourselves bowing to them respectfully, with folded hands. What would the world be like, what would life be like – we might reflect – if nobody had ever developed beyond the confused level of the 'worldling', driven this way and that by desire, aversion, and deluded views? What would the world be like if nobody had lived by a higher and deeper vision of how things could be, and passed it on to others? What would the world be like if the Buddha's realization had simply sunk in to oblivion, because there was nobody to pass it on to the people of the future? People with greater vision, people whose very being is larger and more universal than the norm, people who transmit the Dharma to future generations – such people are indeed an 'incomparable source of goodness to the world.'

The ‘chorus’

After each part of the Tiratana Vandana in praise of one or another of the Three Jewels, there is a verse that is repeated, with just the one difference – the word Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha. In this ‘chorus’, the awareness of the positive qualities of the Three Jewels that we have been connecting with in the verses of praise turns into commitment – a desire to Go for Refuge to each of the Three Jewels.

We chant, ‘All my life I Go for Refuge’ to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – ‘jivata pariyantam saranam gacchami’. The Pāli words ‘jivata pariyantam’ mean ‘until the end of life’, while ‘saranam gacchami’ means ‘I go for Refuge.’ Having called to mind the qualities of each of the Three Jewels, we are now in a position to Go for Refuge to them. We know what we are Going for Refuge to. And we are not just expressing a passing enthusiasm here, we are making a definite commitment, for as long as this life lasts. As Sangharakshita has pointed out, our commitment has a ‘once-and-for-all’ quality about it:

‘... a commitment which is not for life is hardly a commitment. So if you really commit yourself there's a sort of quality of absoluteness about it. You can't see beyond this life, so in practical terms it means you commit yourself for life.’

But despite this once-and-for-all quality, Going for Refuge is also something we do continuously and continually. We need to constantly renew our commitment, to keep it alive as a factor that informs the way we live.

This commitment somehow transcends time – it is for life – and it is to something that is itself timeless: it is to all the Awakened of the past, future, and present, as well as to all the Truth-Teachings, and to all manifestations of Sangha, throughout time. To all manifestations of the Three Jewels in the past (‘atita ca’), yet to be (‘anagata’) or that now are (‘paccupanna’), ‘My worship flows unceasingly’ – ‘Aham vandami sabbada’.

There are no other reliable refuges, there is nothing else that is a Refuge – ‘N’atthi me saranam annam’. The Buddha is the supreme, unsurpassed Refuge for me – ‘Buddho me saranam varam’ – and the same is true of the Dharma and Sangha. Our commitment to this truth is a powerful force that can have a real impact on us and on our world, which is a cause for joy. So the Tirantana Vandana draws to a close by invoking this power – ‘by the virtue of this truth’ (‘etena saccavajjena’) and then ends with a final outburst of joyous well-wishing: ‘Jayamaṅgalaṃ’ – ‘May grace abound, and victory!’

Questions for reflection and discussion

Your group and study leader may think it is more appropriate either to discuss these questions fully, or else to learn to chant the Tiratana Vandana together, and then to discuss selected questions in any time remaining. Either way, please reflect on the questions before the session.

1. Do you think of the Buddha as your ‘Unsurpassed Guide’, whose teachings come from a higher and deeper perception of the truth than those of other teachers, writers or thinkers? (Be honest!) Who else influences your thinking?
2. Think of some ways in which, as far as you are concerned, the Dharma has been ‘well communicated’ – ‘Svākkhāto’ – and put into a form that you can relate to. Which books, talks, teachings, stories, myths, rituals or images have spoken to you particularly strongly?
3. Think of some ways in which the effects of practicing the Dharma have been ‘immediately apparent’ – ‘sandiṭṭhiko’ – in your own experience.
4. The Tiratana Vandana calls the Dharma ‘timeless’ – ‘akāliko’. When the Dharma seems to conflict with contemporary ways of thinking, do you tend to:
 - a) Assume that the Dharma should be updated to reflect our superior modern knowledge, or
 - b) Assume that contemporary world-views are limited in some ways, because they are not based on the vision of a Buddha?
5. Can you think of examples where each of these conclusions might be more appropriate?
6. Which of the descriptions of the Sangha given in the Tiratana Vandana seem to apply to your local Sangha? (For example, do the Order Members and mitras at your Centre seem to be ‘happily proceeding’, and so on?)
7. Think of some members of the Sangha (past and present, and from any tradition) who you admire and respect. Reflect on why you admire them, and be ready to share this with the group.
8. In what ways are such people ‘an incomparable source of goodness for the world’?

Tiratana Vandana – Pāli Text and Translation

The Buddha Vandana

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Iti'pi so bhagavā araham̐ sammā-sambuddho
vijjā-carana sampanno sugato
loka-vidū, anuttaro purisa-damma-sāratī
satthā deva-manussānam̐
buddho bhagavā ti
Buddham jīvita pariyantam saranam̐ gacchāmi

Ye ca Buddha atītā ca
Ye ca Buddha anāgatā
Paccuppannā ca ye Buddha
Aham̐ vandāmi sabbadā
N'atthi me saranam̐ aññam̐
Buddho me saranam̐ varam̐
Etena sacca-vajjena
Hotu me jayamaṅgalam̐

Translation

Such indeed is He, the Richly Endowed: the Free, the Fully
and Perfectly Awake, Equipped with Knowledge and Practice,
the Happily Attained, Knower of the Worlds, Guide Unsurpassed
of Men to Be Tamed, the Teacher of Gods and Men, the Awakened
One Richly Endowed.
All my life I go for Refuge to the Awakened One.

To all the Awakened of the past,
To all the Awakened yet to be,
To all the Awakened that now are,
My worship flows unceasingly.
No other refuge than the Wake,
Refuge supreme, is there for me.
Oh by the virtue of this truth,
May grace abound, and victory!

The Dharma Vandana

Svākkhāto bhagavatā Dhammo
sandiṭṭhiko akāliko ehipassiko
opanayiko paccataṃ
veditabbo viññūhī'ti

Dhammañ jīvita-pariyantañ saranañ gacchāmi

Ye ca Dhammā atītā ca
Ye ca Dhammā anāgatā
Paccuppannā ca ye Dhamma
Ahaṃ vandāmi sabbadā
N'atthi me saranañ aññañ
Dhammo me saranañ varañ
Etena sacca-vajjena
Hotu me jayamaṅgalañ

Translation

Well communicated is the Teaching of the Richly Endowed One,
Immediately Apparent, Perennial, of the Nature of a Personal
Invitation, Progressive, to be understood individually, by the wise.
All my life I go for Refuge to the Truth.

To all the Truth-Teachings of the past,
To all the Truth-Teachings yet to be,
To all the Truth-Teachings that now are,
My worship flows unceasingly.
No other refuge than the Truth,
Refuge supreme, is there for me.
Oh by the virtue of this truth,
May grace abound, and victory!

The Sangha Vandana

Supaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
ujupaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
ñāyapaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
sāmīcipaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
yadidañ cattāri purisayugāni
atṭha purisapuggalā
Esa bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
āhuneyyo, pāhuneyyo, dakkhineyyo
añjalikaraṇīyo anuttarañ
puññaḥkhattam lokassā'ti
Sanghañ jīvita-pariyantañ saranañ gacchāmi

Ye ca Sangha atītā ca
Ye ca Sangha anāgatā
Paccuppannā ca ye Sangha
Ahaṃ vandāmi sabbadā
N'atthi me saranañ aññañ
Saṅho me saranañ varañ
Etena sacca-vajjena

Hotu me jayamaṅgalaṃ

Translation

Happily proceeding is the fellowship of the Hearers of the Richly Endowed One,
uprightly proceeding...,
methodically proceeding...,
correctly proceeding...,
namely, these four pairs of Individuals,
these eight Persons.

This fellowship of Hearers of the Richly Endowed One is worthy of worship, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of salutation with folded hands, an incomparable source of goodness to the world.

All my life I go for Refuge to the Fellowship.

To all the Fellowships that were,
To all the Fellowships to be,
To all the Fellowships that now are,
My worship flows unceasingly.
No refuge but the Fellowship,
Refuge supreme, is there for me.
Oh by the virtue of this truth,
May grace abound, and victory!