

1

FWBO Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year Part 5: Buddhism and the FWBO, Devotional Practice

Week 7: Ritual and Devotion (4) – The Sevenfold Pūjā

Text purpose written by Vadanya

Introduction

The Sevenfold Pūjā is the most challenging of the devotional practices normally used in the FWBO, but it can also be the most rewarding. It is an advanced practice that asks us to express states of mind that are almost certainly beyond us at the moment. The Sevenfold Pūjā is a rehearsal for a role we are not yet ready to play; but, like any rehearsal, its purpose is to prepare us for what is to come.

The origin of the pūjā

The words we use in the Sevenfold Pūjā come from a long poem called the ‘Bodhicaryāvatāra’ (‘Guide to the Path of Awakening’), written by the Indian monk Śāntideva, who lived around the year 700CE. However the Sevenfold Pūjā seems to have been an important practice for several hundred years before Śāntideva wrote his version. The particular verses that we use were selected by Sangharakshita from an unpublished translation of the Bodhicaryāvatāra, which – unlike the more scholarly published versions – has the virtue of turning Śāntideva's Sanskrit poetry into English that is rhythmic and pleasing to chant.

The Bodhicaryāvatāra is a distinctly Mahāyāna text, and the Sevenfold Pūjā has a distinctly Mahāyāna flavour. This means that it emphasizes the Bodhisattva ideal of spiritual practice for the sake of all beings, that it invokes a host of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who can help us by their influence, and that its aim is to move us towards the arising of the Bodhicitta, the transpersonal ‘Will to Enlightenment’.

A Bodhicitta practice

We discussed the Bodhicitta in the last session of Part 4 of this course (it might help to re-read this), but because the Sevenfold Pūjā is essentially a Bodhicitta practice, it might be useful to say a few words about it here. We could think of the Bodhicitta as a current of spiritual energy, a stream of positive volition that is larger than any individual, but which we as individuals can align ourselves with, become receptive to, and ultimately express and be part of. This current of positive volition is what motivates the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but it can also act through us, at our lower level, to the extent that we can get our small, self-preoccupied selves out of the way. This way of seeing the spiritual life offers a different perspective on the Buddhist path from the one we are probably used to, in which it is seen as a quest for Insight, but the goal is the same. Insight involves seeing beyond our delusion of separate self-hood to a much wider vision of interconnectedness, and getting ‘our small, self-preoccupied selves out of the way’ is both a preparation for, and an expression of, this Insight.

We should not turn this way of looking at the spiritual life into a religious dogma or a philosophical theory – it is essentially a poetic vision, a creative myth that gives our spiritual life a powerful imaginative context, and also overcomes some of the near enemies of genuine Buddhist practice, such as seeing it as an individualistic quest for pleasant mental states. The fact that this is a poetic vision does not mean that it is not ‘true’ – the nature of reality is almost certainly more like a vision or a myth than it is like any intellectual theory that can be expressed in words.

Because the idea of the Bodhicitta is poetic or mythic rather than intellectual, it is probably most easily expressed through an image. One good image for it is the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara, in which the Bodhisattva of Compassion is shown as a single body with a multitude of arms, each holding a different implement, each offering something different to help beings evolve. Each arm of Avalokiteśvara is a distinct individual, but in another sense they are all united, all expressing the common purpose of the Bodhisattva. Using this image, we could say that the ultimate purpose of the pūjā is make us ready to offer ourselves to Avalokiteśvara, as one of his many arms.

A rehearsal

The Sevenfold Pūjā takes us through a series of guided reflections and visualizations that generate a progressive sequence of spiritual moods, each of which builds on and follows logically from the one before. This sequence culminates, in the Dedication of Merits and Self-Surrender section, in us giving ourselves to the Bodhicitta, dedicating ourselves to the cosmic project of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and offering our lives, talents and possessions to all beings.

For most of us this is something we can only do in our imagination at present. There are words in the last section of the pūjā – and perhaps before – that most of us cannot say wholeheartedly. But we should not worry too much about this. The Sevenfold Pūjā is a rehearsal. We are rehearsing the role of the trainee Bodhisattva, dressing in a robe that is several sizes too big for us. There is nothing dishonest about this. When we are children we play at different aspects of being an adult, as a preparation for taking on the role of an adult. When we rehearse the emotions of the last stage of the pūjā we are playing at growing up to our full stature. This will help us to do this fully in the future, and perhaps even to do it in some small measure right now. Eventually, if we persist, we will be able to say the words of the last section of the pūjā with a whole heart. Then all our problems will be over. To use Śāntideva's image, we will have found the philosophers stone that turns the heavy lead of our ordinary life into gold.

Worship

‘With mandarava, blue lotus, and jasmine,
With all flowers pleasing and fragrant,
And with garlands skilfully woven,
I pay honour to the princes of the Sages,

So worthy of veneration.

I envelop them in clouds of incense,
Sweet and penetrating;
I make them offerings of food, hard and soft,
And pleasing kinds of liquids to drink.

I offer them lamps, encrusted with jewels,
Festooned with golden lotus.
On the paving, sprinkled with perfume,
I scatter handfuls of beautiful flowers.’

To open ourselves to the influence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas we need firstly to be aware of them, so in the first stage of the Sevenfold Pūjā we extend an invitation to them, asking the Bodhicitta and its manifestations to visit us, to enter our awareness. We imagine ourselves extending this invitation by making the seven traditional Indian offerings to an honoured guest: flowers, incense, food, water for drinking, water for washing, the light of lamps, and perfume. It is as though we were welcoming a famous person whom we respect very highly into our home, knowing that they will be tired, hungry, thirsty and dusty from travelling to do us this honour. Inviting the Buddha or the Bodhicitta into our mind is like inviting a great king or queen into a small shabby flat – the least we can do is to offer them what they need to feel comfortable and welcome.

Mandarava are huge mythic flowers, as large as cartwheels and shining golden like the sun, which rain from the sky whenever the Buddha gives a particularly auspicious discourse. So with the very first word of the pūjā we are in a poetic, mythic realm, not in the world of everyday reality. From the very start we need to engage with the pūjā in this spirit – we need to give our everyday common-sense mind a holiday, suspend disbelief, and be willing to enter another dimension of experience. Most of us are practised at doing this – if we can enjoy any literature, opera, or films that depict something other than the ‘kitchen sink’ world of everyday routine, we know that we do not have to believe that what we are experiencing is literally ‘true’ to engage our imagination with it, and to allow it to transform our emotions.

Among the offerings of flowers we give ‘garlands skilfully woven.’ In India the tradition of honouring a person by garlanding them with colourful strings of flowers is still very much alive, and those who have experienced this will know that this is a very obvious and visible way of showing respect, and generates a joyful, celebratory atmosphere.

As well as putting us in a mood of respectful invitation, Sangharakshita has pointed out that the Worship section should also awaken a sense of beauty. The experience of beauty is one of the ways we connect with something higher than our ordinary workaday mind; it refines the consciousness and makes it tend towards a higher plane of being, and for this reason it is closely connected with śraddhā. If we can experience a sense of beauty in our imagination at the start of the pūjā we have taken a step towards the realm of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,

and we will find it easier to align our intentions with theirs. To evoke this beauty we need to use our imagination to conjure up the images in Śāntideva's verses as vividly as we can. We need to see the mandarava and other flowers in our imagination, in all their colourful exuberance; we need to smell the incense, which is so evocative of beautiful places and higher states of mind; we need to conjure up a picture of ourselves scattering flowers on a tiled mosaic pavement within a beautiful, mythic palace, 'where canopies gleam with pearls, over delightful pillars, brilliant with gems, rising up from floors of clear, brilliant crystal' – to quote the Bodhicaryāvatāra.

However the evocations of beauty used in the pūjā are rooted in Indian culture, and they do not always speak strongly to people from a different background. In Śāntideva's poem he also conjures up images of nature as offerings to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and this can be a more accessible way of connecting with a sense of beauty. We need to be creative in the way we engage with the pūjā, so if images of mountains, forests, starry skies or sunsets work better for you, then conjure these up in your mind at the end of the 'Worship' section, and imagine yourself offering these to the Buddhas.

After the Worship section we normally chant the Avalokiteśvara mantra, while those who want to make offerings to the shrine. We invoke Avalokiteśvara at this point as the main patron of our pūjā because, of all the Bodhisattvas, he most clearly symbolizes the Bodhicitta.

Salutation

As many atoms as there are
In the thousand million worlds,
So many times I make reverent salutation
To all the Buddhas of the Three Eras,
To the Saddharma,
And to the excellent Community.

I pay homage to all the shrines,
And places in which the Bodhisattvas have been.
I make profound obeisance to the Teachers,
And those to whom respectful salutation is due.

A salutation is a respectful greeting; in the context of the pūjā it means bowing with the hands together in reverence, or perhaps even making full-length prostrations. Having invited the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas into our experience in the Worship section, we conjure up the image of ourselves bowing to them. By bowing we acknowledge that the Bodhicitta is bigger than we are, and that the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas stand above us. If we think our little individual self is as important as the Bodhicitta, we can hardly give ourselves to it. If we think we are on an equal level with the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we cannot be receptive to their influence. If we think like this we are stuck in narrow-minded arrogance, and the wide expansiveness of what one Buddhist teacher has called Big Mind cannot fit into that cramped space. So to free ourselves from this, and to make

room for something bigger than ourselves as we currently are to enter our mind, we bow.

In fact we imagine ourselves bowing as many times as there are atoms in ‘the thousand million worlds.’ If we were to make all these bows one after the other the Salutation section would take rather a long time. But traditional commentaries advise us to imagine as we say these lines that there is a tiny replica of ourselves in each atom of the universe, and that they all bow in unison. So we visualize ourselves as the universe, and the universe as ourselves, and we bow to the highest values that the universe contains. By calling this image to mind we are stepping out of our small-minded identification with just one tiny human being, and identifying with something much larger, at least in our imagination.

Of course for us this is still a fiction, and we must not get too carried away by this abstract idea. We need to make this reverence more concrete, and to relate it to our actual experience. So the verses of the pūjā gradually bring us down to earth, asking us to bow to progressively more and more concrete and everyday manifestations of the Bodhicitta.

Firstly we imagine ourselves bowing to each of the Three Jewels. (‘The Buddhas of the Three eras’ are the Buddhas of the past, present and future; ‘Saddharma’ means the true, real Dharma; and of course the ‘excellent community’ is the Sangha.) Then we bow to ‘all shrines/ and places in which the Bodhisattvas have been’; at this point we could imagine ourselves bowing to actual shrines or pilgrimage sites we have come across. Then we also see ourselves bowing to ‘the teachers’, which of course could include past great figures of the Buddhist tradition, but might also include Sangharakshita, and any other teachers or spiritual friends who have helped us on our way. Finally we salute all ‘those to whom respectful salutation is due’: we express our respect for all practitioners of the Dharma, especially to those we can acknowledge as being further along the path than ourselves – and perhaps including some people around us in the shrine room right now as we chant the pūjā.

At the beginning of the Salutation section, as we chant the mantra, we have an opportunity to express our reverence for our ideals with our body, by bowing to the shrine, and perhaps even by making full length prostrations. What is appropriate depends on our own feelings, and on the context. In Sangharakshita’s words:

‘Some people (especially people experiencing a pūjā for the first time) react quite strongly to the practice of prostrations. So...we should be a little careful about prostration, and give consideration not only to our own devotional feelings but also to the susceptibilities of others who may be present. None the less, some form of physical salutation is important if we are to engage our emotions fully with this section and move forward from the stage of worship.’

Going for Refuge

This very day
I go for my refuge
To the powerful protectors,
Whose purpose is to guard the universe;
The mighty conquerors who overcome suffering everywhere.

Wholeheartedly also I take my refuge
In the Dharma they have ascertained,
Which is the abode of security against the rounds of rebirth.
Likewise in the host of Bodhisattvas
I take my refuge.

There is not much point in admiring the stream of positive intention that is the Bodhicitta unless we are willing to live in a way that aligns us with it, rather than putting us in conflict with it. There is not much point in revering the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas unless we are willing to heed their advice. So the next stage of the pūjā is Going for Refuge – our admiration for the ideal leads to a commitment to live and practice according to it. So we commit ourselves to the Three Jewels; we commit ourselves to practice in a way that will help us to grow to be more like the ideal we admire.

So we Go for Refuge ‘This very day’ – if we mean it, we will want to act on it now, not put it off to some better time. (Now is the only time there is.) In Śāntideva's verses, what we go for refuge to firstly are ‘the powerful protectors’, rather than just the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. This reflects the way the Buddha Refuge is seen in Mahāyāna Buddhism, in which the Buddha Principle is seen as manifesting itself through a range of different archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

But in what sense are these Buddhas ‘protectors’? In what sense do they ‘guard the universe’? And how can we say that they ‘overcome suffering everywhere’, when there is obviously still so much suffering in the world? In Sangharakshita's words:

‘... the sense in which the Buddhas are said to be ‘protectors’ is not that they ‘guard the universe’ in the way... God is supposed to, or protect us from worldly disasters.... It is that they keep open the way to Enlightenment.’

From a Buddhist perspective, the only way to finally overcome suffering is to awaken. The Buddhas ‘overcome suffering everywhere’ because they help beings who are open to their influence to move towards Enlightenment, wherever they happen to be. They protect those who practice according to their advice from negative states and lower realms of being, not from worldly misfortunes.

As well as Going for Refuge to the Buddhas, we also commit ourselves to ‘the Dharma they have ascertained’, and to the Sangha, referred to here as ‘the host of Bodhisattvas.’ This is a distinctly Mahāyāna way of describing the Ārya Sangha,

or ‘Noble Sangha’, which is seen as the community of those in whom the Bodhicitta has arisen. But as Sangharakshita has often pointed out, the distinction between this Mahāyāna Noble Sangha and the ‘stream entrants’, arahants and so forth of the Hīnayāna or ‘lesser vehicle’ is a false one. What is supposed to distinguish the bodhisattvas from the arahants is that they practice for the well-being of all, rather than just to liberate themselves from suffering; but in fact anyone who has achieved a degree of Insight in whatever ‘vehicle’ of Buddhism will have seen beyond the distinction between self and other, and will be motivated by concern for others as well as by desire for their own well-being.

After the Going for Refuge section from the distinctly Mahāyāna Bodhicaryāvatāra, we normally chant the Refuges and Precepts in Pāli, the language of the so-called ‘Hīnayāna’ Theravādin school, underlining the fact that there is no difference in the meaning of Going for Refuge in these two major strands of Buddhism. It is particularly relevant that we chant the Precepts at this point, because they give us practical, down-to-earth guidelines about how we can align our behaviour with what is positive, and so open ourselves to its influence. To the extent that our life is not governed by the Precepts we will be cut off from the current of positive intention that manifests through the advanced practitioners of the Dharma; so committing ourselves to a skilful life is the logical next step after inviting these exalted beings into our environment and expressing our reverence for them.

Confession of Faults

The evil that I have heaped up
Through my ignorance and foolishness –
Evil in the world of everyday experience,
As well as evil in understanding and intelligence –
All that I acknowledge to the Protectors.

Standing before them
With hands raised in reverence,
And terrified of suffering,
I pay salutations again and again.

May the Leaders receive this kindly,
Just as it is, with its many faults!
What is not good, O Protectors,
I shall not do again.

Having committed ourselves to the Precepts, we may become painfully aware of all the ways we do not yet practice them. We may see the habits that keep us stuck in our small perspective, and the patterns that stop us being a hand of Avalokiteśvara. So we need to acknowledge this, and not try to brush it under the carpet. We need to see the obstacles that stand in our way, or our practice will be based on self-delusion. So the next stage of the pūjā is confession: we acknowledge the unskilful tendencies that block us from higher states, we express

regret for the actions that created them, and we decide to behave differently in the future.

Unfortunately the very word confession brings up a negative reaction in some people, usually because of associations with Christianity. But this is not confession in the Christian sense: we are not asking for forgiveness for disobeying god, we are simply acknowledging the reality of our present state, and motivating ourselves to do something about it.

The use of the word ‘evil’ may seem reminiscent of Christianity, but we should not let this sidetrack us – we have all accumulated a burden of negative tendencies through our unskilful actions, committed out of ‘ignorance and foolishness’. These actions are ‘evil in the world of everyday experience’, and the deluded views that led to them are ‘evil in understanding and intelligence’. We acknowledge all this ‘with hands raised in reverence’, seeing ourselves in the presence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (‘the protectors’ again.) Imagining ourselves making our confession to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas helps us to see ourselves as we might look through their eyes. On the one hand this can help us to see our flaws more clearly; on the other hand it can dispel any self-hatred or harsh judgmentalism – the Buddhas understand why we are as we are, and their response is entirely one of compassion.

As for the next line – ‘terrified of suffering’ – Sangharakshita says this:

‘Some people are very uncomfortable with the phrase ‘terrified of suffering’ ... perhaps reminded of Hellfire sermons... However it is not the Buddhas who inflict suffering on us, but our own evil deeds operating through the law of karma... There is no notion of judgment, retribution, or punishment here. The Buddhas’ attitude towards us will always be one of mettā and compassion... You are simply reminding yourself... that unethical actions have unpleasant consequences... Sometimes people have said to me that they simply are not terrified of suffering. If this is really so, it can only be due to lack of imagination.’

We ask the ‘Leaders’ to ‘receive this kindly’, not because we are asking for forgiveness, but because of its ‘many faults’: in the eyes of a Buddha any confession we make will be riddled with unawareness and self-deception, but we can trust that they will see all this through kindly eyes. Finally we undertake not to repeat our unskilful patterns, so that we can move forward.

Rejoicing in Merit

I rejoice with delight
In the good done by all beings,
Through which they obtain rest
With the end of suffering.
May those who have suffered be happy!

I rejoice in the release of beings
From the sufferings of the rounds of existence;
I rejoice in the nature of the Bodhisattva
And the Buddha,
Who are Protectors.

I rejoice in the arising of the Will to Enlightenment,
And the Teaching:
Those Oceans that bring happiness to all beings,
And are the abode of welfare of all beings.

If we have genuinely decided to leave our unskilful actions behind we may feel a sense of relief and lightness after the confession section, but in case we still feel heavy-hearted at seeing all the work that we still need to do, in the next section of the pūjā we lift our spirits, by focusing on the positive rather than on what needs to change. Our unskilful patterns are only part of the picture. There is also a lot of goodness in the world, and in ourselves. So we call other people's positive qualities to mind – and maybe also our own – and we rejoice in them.

In the Salutation section we started at the highest, most general level, and worked down to the concrete particulars; in the Rejoicing section we take the opposite approach. We start by calling to mind all the many everyday manifestations of positive intention we see around us – ‘the good done by all beings’ – and we celebrate them, we rejoice in them. We also reflect that these skilful actions are not something that harm the people who do them – in fact they are the source of their only real happiness. Through such actions people gradually end the suffering of being whirled around the Wheel of Life by greed, hatred and delusion, so we rejoice in this: ‘I rejoice in the release of beings/From the sufferings of the rounds of existence.’

From such everyday manifestations of skilfulness we then move to the ‘Nature of the Bodhisattva/And the Buddha’ – we could take this to mean the Bodhicitta itself, which is their true nature, and which we can imagine as the stream of energy behind all positive actions. We rejoice in ‘The arising of the Will to Enlightenment’ – the irruption of the Bodhicitta in the mind-stream of beings. And we rejoice in ‘the Teaching’ – the Dharma – reflecting as we do so that the Bodhicitta and the Dharma are the source of true happiness; they are the ‘...oceans that bring happiness to all beings,/And are the abode of welfare of all beings.’

As well as raising our spirits after the self-examination of the confession section, the rejoicing in merits represents an important stage in the process of opening ourselves to the Bodhicitta. An important aspect of identifying with something larger than ourselves is that we rejoice in its successes. If we support a football team, identifying ourselves with it, we rejoice every time any of its players scores a goal. So we start by identifying ourselves as a supporter of the Bodhicitta, and we rejoice in its successes – we rejoice in all skilful actions, whoever does them, and in all positive qualities, whoever has them. But we do not want to just stay a supporter of the Bodhicitta, we want to play on its side. If we play for a sports team we do not only rejoice when we score a goal ourselves, we rejoice when

anyone on our side scores. So even if we are a minor player in the Bodhicitta's team, we do not just aim for our own spiritual progress, our own meditation, our own Insight. We aim for and rejoice in everybody's spiritual progress, everybody's merits, anybody's Insight. If other people have insights or develop positive qualities, it is as good as if we had done so ourselves – or nearly so. This does not stop us from striving for them, any more than we stop trying because we are not the only member of a team; but what is important is the overall effort, and not just our personal success. So by rejoicing in all the manifestations of the Bodhicitta we are beginning to identify ourselves with it, firstly as a supporter, and then as an active part of its 'team.' We are no longer just admiring the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we are beginning to identify with the project they are engaged in, and to want to play our part in it.

Entreaty and Supplication

Saluting them with folded hands
I entreat the Buddhas in all the quarters:
May they make shine the lamp of the Dharma
For those wandering in the suffering of delusion!

With hands folded in reverence
I implore the conquerors desiring to enter Nirvana:
May they remain here for endless ages,
So that life in this world does not grow dark.

In the sixth stage we imagine ourselves asking the Buddhas to stay in this realm, teaching the Dharma and exercising their positive influence. So we ask them to '... shine the lamp of the Dharma/For those wandering in the suffering of delusion' – which of course includes us. This section refers to a story in which the Buddha supposedly had a choice between entering final Nirvana and staying on the earth to teach, and chose the former because he was not asked to stay. It is also linked to the idea that following the Bodhisattva path involves a decision not to enter the bliss of Nirvana, but to postpone full Enlightenment in order to help other beings. This is essentially a poetic metaphor, and we should not take it literally. It points to the fact that those following the Bodhisattva path are not seeking bliss for themselves alone, but see their practice in a much larger perspective. But this does not mean that they have postponed Enlightenment, it means that they do not grasp at it for selfish reasons – which makes it all the more likely to arise.

The Buddhas do not need to be asked to 'remain here for endless ages' – it is intrinsic to their compassionate nature that they will do so. The point of this section is not to persuade the Buddhas to do something they might prefer not to do, it is to express and strengthen our receptivity to them. The Buddhas' ability to teach depends on us. They cannot force their influence on us – we must want to be taught. So we express this, to remind ourselves rather than to influence the Buddhas, by asking them for the gift of the Dharma.

We might think that as Buddhists we will of course want the Buddhas to teach and influence us. Of course we will be receptive. But sadly that is not the case. Very often we come to the Dharma with a head full of preconceived views and personal likes and dislikes, and we want the Dharma to fit in with all of these. We want the Bodhicitta to fit itself to our conditioning, rather than to liberate ourselves from our conditioning in order to be open to the Bodhicitta. The teaching of the Buddhas will not fit comfortably into the worldly viewpoint of any age or culture, including ours. So to be receptive to the Buddhas we need to have an open mind about ideas that cut across what we were taught in our education, what the media say, and what all our non-Buddhist friends and colleagues seem to take for granted. When we ask the Buddhas to teach we are signalling this willingness to cut through the jungle of the ideas we have inherited, to get back to the radical simplicity of the truth.

The Entreaty and Supplication section is normally followed by a reading from a Buddhist text – after all, we have just asked for a teaching. This reading should be what is called in Sanskrit *Buddhavaca* – the voice of the Buddha – which means that it should be from a canonical source. This reading is normally followed by the Heart Sūtra, which we chant in unison; from the Mahāyāna point of view the Heart Sūtra contains the very essence or ‘heart’ of the Dharma. We will explore the Heart Sūtra later in the Mitra course – but it is worth saying something now about the mantra with which it closes, the Mantra of Perfect Wisdom, or *Prajñāpāramitā*. We could translate this as meaning: ‘Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond, what an Awakening! Wonderful!’ (The last word, *svaha*, is an expression of celebration and wonder, which one American author has translated as *Wow!*) If we have gone at least a little beyond our normal narrow viewpoint and had at least a little of this ‘Wow!’ experience, we will be ready for what comes next – transference of merits, and then self-surrender.

Transference of Merit and Self-Surrender

May the merit gained
In my acting thus
Go to the alleviation of the suffering of all beings.
My personality throughout my existences,
My possessions,
And my merit in all three ways,
I give up without regard to myself
For the benefit of all beings.

Just as the earth and other elements
Are serviceable in many ways
To the infinite number of beings
Inhabiting limitless space;
So may I become
That which maintains all beings
Situated throughout space,
So long as all have not attained
To peace.

We now come to the culmination of the Sevenfold Pūjā, in which, in our imagination at least, we open ourselves to the Bodhicitta, express our desire to join the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in their task of Enlightening the universe, and dedicate ourselves to the welfare of all beings. The pūjā began with a relatively small act of giving – making offerings – and it now comes full circle, ending with a supreme act of generosity: the offering of ourselves.

This begins by us giving away ‘The merit gained/In my acting thus’ to help alleviate ‘the suffering of all beings.’ This needs some explanation. ‘Merit’ (Sanskrit puṇya) is a metaphor that is widely used almost everywhere in the Buddhist tradition. It stands for the spiritual impetus and positive character traits that are the reward of skilful action and spiritual practice. Sometimes it seems to be thought of as a sort of currency, like money, that we can store for the future, spend on ourselves, or give away. Merit produces happiness, spiritual success, and even worldly luck. So the spiritual life could be thought of in quite selfish terms, as a process of gathering merit for our own benefit. Mahāyāna Buddhism tried to work against this possibility by stressing that we should not try to store up merit for our own sake, but give it away, dedicating it to the progress of all beings. (Of course by selflessly giving our merit away we generate even more merit than we started with!) This ‘dedication of merits’ simply points to the fact that ideally we should not just be practising the Dharma for our own sake, but should use the positive qualities it brings us to benefit others as well as ourselves. By taking part in the pūjā we have generated a certain amount of merit, so, as the first stage of giving ourselves to all beings, we give them the merit we have just created.

But not only do we give up the merit we have just earned, we give away all our merit – our merit ‘in all three ways’ means the merit generated by all our skilful actions of body, speech and mind. We give away our possessions, no longer seeing ourselves as owning them for our own ends, but dedicating them to the cause of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. And, perhaps most challenging of all, we give away ‘My personality throughout my existences’ – we no longer cling to the contingent, conditioned self we have become, with its burden of habits, views, and arbitrary likes and dislikes, but give up this old self to make space for something greater to arise.

Having let go of what keeps us imprisoned in our limited idea of ourselves, in the last section of the pūjā we express the hope that we can become like the five traditional elements – earth, water, fire, air, and space – which pervade everywhere without boundaries, and ‘Are serviceable in many ways/To the Infinite number of beings.’ We want to be part of ‘That which maintains all beings’, as the elements maintain all beings. And we express the determination to keep up this attitude for as long as needed – ‘So long as all have not attained/To Peace.’

This last section of the pūjā is a rehearsal for the spiritual death that will open the way for the rebirth we call the arising of the Bodhicitta, so it is mainly relevant to the latter two stages in Sangharakshita’s description of the process of spiritual development, which are spiritual death and spiritual rebirth. But most of us are not ready for this yet. We probably still have some work to do on the first two stages

of this process: integration, and the development of positive emotion. This does not mean that the sevenfold pūjā is irrelevant to us. We can engage fully with the earlier stages, and we can at least begin to open up to the emotions described in this last stage. In Sangharakshita's words:

‘... [those who are not yet ready] can still get some taste of the Bodhicitta, even though it will not be a full arising... They can act in the Bodhisattva spirit to whatever extent they are capable of doing so. Just as the Bodhisattva aspires to give whatever support he can to the beings of the whole cosmos, so on your own level, if you are at least trying to practice the Bodhisattva ideal, that should naturally involve giving whatever support you can to those within your immediate environment, your spiritual community. If you are not functioning in a supportive way, if you just regard the spiritual community as a convenience to your spiritual development, you are living more in accordance with... the narrowest interpretation of the arahant ideal. Taken in this narrow, extreme form, that ideal becomes self-defeating, because you cannot really help yourself without helping others. If you think in terms of helping yourself to the exclusion of helping others, you have a very rigid idea of self and others, and as long as that fixed view is there you can't even gain Enlightenment for yourself.’

Concluding mantras

The pūjā normally ends with the Padmasambhava mantra chanted in unison, followed by a set of concluding mantras chanted three times each in call and response. The figures invoked by these mantras will be explored later in the mitra course, but meanwhile you may want to find out more about those that appeal to you. By all means see them in your mind's eye as you chant, and feel their presence. The pūjā then finally closes with the word shanti – Sanskrit for peace – repeated three times. Often at the end of the pūjā there is indeed a deep sense of peace, as though something powerful and mysterious had been present, and left an echo in the minds of those taking part. You may find this an excellent time to sit on in meditation.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What offerings would you make to invite the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas into your awareness, if all practical constraints were removed, and you could give whatever you find most beautiful?
2. Do you use your visual imagination in the pūjā, or are you mainly affected by the words themselves, or by the act of chanting, or even by your physical posture?
(There is no right answer to this: some people are very visual, others respond more strongly to words, and others are more influenced by their physical experience. Ideally we would bring all these elements into the pūjā.)
3. How do you feel when you bow and make offerings to the shrine? Do you feel any resistance to doing so? Does it affect your emotions and state of mind?
4. Does the confession section leave you lighter, or heavier-hearted? (Or unaffected?) Do you think that remorse and regret for past unskillfulness is a help or a hindrance to our spiritual progress?
5. Look around you this week for skilful behaviour and positive qualities in the people you come across, which you could rejoice in. Choose a few examples, and share them with the group.
6. If you met the historical Buddha today, what would stop you from being fully receptive to his advice? What would you need to let go of in order to be fully receptive to his teaching?
7. Do you look forward to a sevenfold pūjā, or tend to avoid them? Do you enjoy pūjā when you are taking part? How do you tend to feel at the end of pūjā?