Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras
Year Four

Module 7:
Great Buddhists from the Refuge Tree of the Triratna Buddhist Order
Complied by Saccanāma

Introduction

This module is different from previous modules in two principle ways. Firstly, we shall be looking at how Buddhist practice and teachings are worked out in the context of individual lives rather than at the teachings and practices themselves (as is the case in most of the rest of the Dharma Training Course). Secondly, the main part of the module will consist in you and the others in your group presenting more extended projects on the theme of great Buddhists from the Refuge Tree of the Triratna Buddhist Order. As a consequence, there will be less in the way of input and more for you to do. I am assuming that at this point in the course, you will already have done quite a number of projects, so the option of doing an extended project will not be too taxing for you.

So the primary aims of the module are as follows:

1. To explore the notion of what makes a Buddhist 'great' with some examples from our own times.

2. To introduce the symbol of the Refuge Tree of the Triratna Buddhist Order and in particular the great historical figures that are found upon it. (The Refuge Tree itself is at the centre of what is called the Going for Refuge and Prostration practice, a practice which many people training for ordination into the Triratna Buddhist Order take up).

3. To give you the opportunity to explore in some depth the life of one of the great historical figures of the Buddhist tradition who appear on the Refuge Tree. Within your group you should be able to encounter a number of these figures.

4. To gain inspiration for our own practice of the Dharma through encountering the lives of great Buddhists.

Format for this module

For the first two weeks of this module, you will follow the normal pattern of preparing something and then discussing that in your group meeting. After that, the group meetings will be taken up with your extended projects. To give you time to prepare, you may wish to have a gap of one or two weeks before giving the projects. No doubt you can sort this out with your group leader and the others in your group. Some suggestions for how you might present your project can be found towards the end of the module below.

Core material

The material for weeks one and two is included below but you will need to supplement this with Kulananda's book *Teachers of Enlightenment* (Windhorse Publications ISBN 1899579257). As well as exploring the Going for Refuge and Prostration practice from a number of perspectives, Kulananda gives an introduction to each of the figures on the Refuge Tree. He also provides a good reference section which may well provide you with a starting point for your investigation into your chosen figure from the Refuge Tree.

http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=469

Week One – What Makes a Buddhist 'Great'?

In this first week, we will be looking at the qualities that go to make up a 'great' Buddhist and at a few examples of great Buddhists from our own times. So please read the following transcription of a talk given by Sangharakshita in 1995 and consider the suggested questions before attending your group meeting.

Great Buddhists of the Twentieth Century by Sangharakshita

(Windhorse Publications © Sangharakshita 1996 ISBN 9780-904766-80-6)

Publisher's note: Since this work is intended for a general readership, Pali and Sanskrit words are transliterated without the diacritical marks that would have been appropriate in a work of a more scholarly nature.

"Hero-worship is not in fashion at this time, at the end of the twentieth century – except, perhaps, in a perverted, degenerate or trivial form. History is nowadays presented – even to children – in terms of the small doings of ordinary people rather than the momentous actions of great individuals. It would appear that children are offered facts and figures – and of course pocket calculators – rather than the inspirational examples of heroes like Nelson and Florence Nightingale. And this does seem to me a very unfortunate development. We need people we can look up to, people on whom we can model ourselves, and from whom we can derive inspiration. We need, in short, heroes in the true, positive sense.

Above all, we need spiritual heroes; and not only heroes – even legendary heroes – from the dim and distant past, but also heroic exemplars from our own time. Nor is there any dearth of contemporary or near-contemporary ones. I have to say that I started turning over in my mind this subject of great Buddhists of the twentieth century with the assumption that there would be no more than a handful of individuals to consider. But it did not take me long to realize that I had a problem. There seemed to have been dozens upon dozens of them.

Unless one is going to attempt an exhaustive guide to the great Buddhists of the twentieth century one has to select. And unless one is going to do this according to mere whim, then one has to look round for some meaningful principles by which to make one's selection. On what basis could I focus on certain individuals and not others?

In the end I allowed two principles to direct my choice. First, I decided not to touch upon any great Buddhists who were still alive. After all, there is always the faint possibility of great Buddhists ceasing to be so, either by changing their religion or by losing their greatness of character – and then where would that leave us? Edward Gibbon remarks that in the later stages of the reign of the emperor Constantine the Great, who was later canonized as St Constantine, 'We may contemplate a hero, who had so long inspired his subjects with love and his enemies with terror, degenerating into a cruel and dissolute monarch…' So such things happen from time to time, unfortunately. We should heed Sophocles'

warning: ‘Call no man happy until he is dead,’ and be wary of calling someone a great Buddhist too definitively before he or she is safely dead.

As for my second principle of selection, this was to consider no one with whom I had not had some kind of personal contact. I did, however, make an exception for Anagarika Dharmapala, the first of my five great Buddhists, who died in India in 1933 when I was still a small boy living in Tooting, London. I feel justified in making this exception because I do have the sense that I lived with him for several weeks while composing my biography of him in 1952, having spent this time amongst the many volumes of his diaries.

Just one preliminary question remains to be cleared up, but it is quite an important one. How do we define a great Buddhist? Well, in the first place, great Buddhists have to be Buddhists. That is, they have to go for Refuge to the Three Jewels, to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. It is not enough in itself to be a great scholar of Buddhism, to be learned in Sanskrit and Pali, to make outstanding and original contributions to Buddhist studies.

It’s not enough, either, to occupy a prominent position in a Buddhist organization. During my time in the East it was a recurring puzzle to me, when I came into contact with various Buddhist organizations, and met their presidents and secretaries, to discover that these dignitaries weren’t actually Buddhists. So it is not enough to have a position of influence in the Buddhist world. Nor of course is it enough to have been born into a position of influence in the Buddhist world – to have been born into a Buddhist royal family, say.

Moreover, a great Buddhist is not just a great individual with Buddhist leanings. To be a great Buddhist, one would have to possess at least some of the characteristically Buddhist qualities to an eminent degree. Great Buddhists possess not just a little bit of metta, not just an occasional burst of virya, not just the beginnings of prajna. They have, we may say, at least some of these qualities ‘in spades’.

Naturally, it goes without saying that they have, too, the basic human virtues – straightforward kindness and awareness of the needs of others, an integrated personality, self-knowledge, and so on – and these also to an eminent degree. One can’t be a great – or even a good – Buddhist, without being a great or good human being.

Besides having at least some of these virtues, they should deploy them in their life and work in such a way as to influence many other people, especially many other Buddhists. Thus a great Buddhist contributes to the making of Buddhist history. Furthermore, a great Buddhist is a paradigmatic figure, providing a model or an example for other Buddhists, both when alive and after death. That is, he or she functions as a source of permanent inspiration and guidance for other Buddhists. Not all the five here could be said to be equally great – though it is difficult to compare them very accurately in that way as they were great in very different ways. And I must also say that I personally don’t necessarily agree with

everything that each of them said or did or wrote. But they were all undoubtedly great in the sense that I have defined.

Finally, in our definition of terms, we come to ‘twentieth century’. Strictly speaking, from a Buddhist point of view we should perhaps be talking about the ‘twenty-fifth century’ (i.e. after the Buddha’s Enlightenment) – which concluded in 1956–7CE – rather than the twentieth century (i.e. after the birth of Christ). But never mind. ‘Twentieth century’ can be taken simply as convenient shorthand for ‘more or less within living memory’. The first four of our great Buddhists were, in fact, all born in the nineteenth century, though they did most, if not all, their significant work for Buddhism in the twentieth.

My concern in these biographical sketches is not so much with the everyday biographical details – what they used to have for breakfast, say. It is rather with the significance of their lives for us, living as we do in the fresh wake of their achievements, and in something of the same twentieth century world as they did.

Anagarika Dharmapala

Dharmapala, the future 'Lion of Lanka' as he came to be called, was born in 1864 in Colombo, Sri Lanka – except that here we must call this island 'Ceylon', because that is the name it had in those days. His father was the proprietor of a furniture manufacturing business, so he had a solid, middle-class background and his parents were good, pious Buddhists, so one might have thought that he would have had a solid, Buddhist background as well.

However, he was christened 'David' – his name was David Hewavitarne. And from the time he was five until eight, and again from ten to eighteen, he attended a series of Christian schools, both Catholic and Protestant. So this calls for some explanation. Why did his pious Buddhist parents send him to Christian schools? The reason is simply that they had no choice. Ceylon had been a British colony since 1802, and before that, between 1505 and 1796, large parts of the island had been ruled first by the Portuguese and then by the Dutch. The result was that Buddhism and Buddhist culture at the time of Dharmapala's birth were at a very low ebb in Ceylon. In fact, it was not possible to be a Buddhist at all – at least, not officially. Children of Buddhist parents had to be taken for registration of their birth to a church – either Catholic or Protestant – and there given a Christian name. Otherwise, according to a law which was not repealed until 1884, the child would be illegitimate and unable to inherit property. And all education beyond primary level was in the hands of the missionaries.

So by the time he was in his early teens, Dharmapala knew by heart four complete books of the Old Testament, all four Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles. However, he never lost faith in the Dharma. And later on, when Dharmapala came to the West as quite a celebrity and engaged in what we would call today 'inter-faith dialogue', Christians would sometimes regret that he knew their religion quite so intimately.

Dharmapala picked up a basic understanding of Buddhism at home, and being unusually argumentative, even for an adolescent boy, he used to get into trouble with his teachers for the persistence with which he picked away at inconsistencies in Christian doctrine. A much more serious offence, however, was his insistence on celebrating Wesak, the festival in honour of the Buddha's attainment of Enlightenment. At that time, of course, it wasn't a public holiday. Christmas was a public holiday, Easter was a public holiday – Wesak wasn't.

But when Dharmapala was in his early teens he realized that as a Buddhist he ought to celebrate Wesak, and in order to do this he would have to be given the day off school. So he went to the headmaster and asked to have the day off in order to celebrate the most important festival in the Buddhist calendar.

Unsurprisingly, the headmaster said, 'No.' Equally unsurprisingly, Dharmapala took his umbrella, walked out of the school, and simply didn't turn up for school the next day. He celebrated Wesak, and the following day was soundly thrashed. And this little drama was enacted between Dharmapala and his headmaster once a

year for three consecutive years. This was how obstinate and determined he was, even as a boy.

We know a lot of details about Dharmapala's life, even before he became well-known, because he kept a diary more or less from the time he left school until his death in 1933. He also wrote some memoirs later on in life, and in these we find described another incident from his schooldays that shows a deeper side to his character.

It so happened that one of his schoolfellows died, and the corpse was laid out in the school. The teachers apparently invited the students to gather round the dead body of the boy and offer up prayers, and Dharmapala joined them. But as he looked around, a question came into his mind. He asked himself, 'Why are they praying?' And as he continued to look at the faces of his schoolfellows, at the faces of the teachers, the answer came to him quite clearly that they were afraid; they were afraid of death. This was why they were praying. He saw that prayer – petitionary prayer – was born of fear. And from that day onward he had no temptation to pray in that sort of way.

This uppish, confrontational teenager, however, was also a rather dreamy lover of poetry, reading widely in English literature, especially the Romantics, and particularly Shelley. He read Keats and Shelley constantly. And this poetic streak went in counterpoint with marked mystical and ascetic tendencies.

Fortunately for this idealistic youth, things were changing, even in colonial Ceylon, and the tide was beginning to turn in Buddhism's favour. In 1875 in New York, Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott had founded the Theosophical Society. They were both very sympathetic to what they understood of Buddhism, and in 1880 they arrived in Ceylon, declared themselves to be Buddhists, and publicly took the Refuges and Precepts from a prominent Sinhalese bhikkhu. This created a tremendous sensation from one end of the island to the other, because they were the first Europeans publicly to embrace Buddhism.
The Christian missionaries were understandably very upset, and they continued to be upset because Colonel Olcott took rather a liking to Ceylon. He stayed on and devoted himself to the cause of Buddhist education, eventually setting up more than 300 Buddhist schools, some of which are still in existence. Sri Lankans still celebrate his work on 'Olcott Day'.

As for the still very young Dharmapala, he helped Colonel Olcott in his work, particularly by acting as his translator. Dharmapala also became quite close to Madame Blavatsky. In his late teens, he had wanted to study occultism, as so many Theosophists did, but Madame Blavatsky advised him to follow a very different course. She advised him to study Pali and to work for the good of humanity – which is what he did. And it was at this time that he changed his name from David to Dharmapala (meaning 'the Guardian of the Dharma').

In 1891 he paid his first visit to the holy places of northern India and found them in a shockingly neglected condition. Some of them were no more than ruins. This should not really have been any cause for surprise because Buddhism had

disappeared from India several centuries before. Whatever of Buddhism that had not been absorbed by Hinduism had been destroyed by Muslim invaders.
The ancient Maha Bodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, the most sacred of all the Buddhist holy places, had been restored by General Sir Alexander Cunningham. However, there was no one to look after the place, and when Dharmapala arrived there he was profoundly saddened by its desolate aspect. He sought out the Vajrasana, or 'Diamond Throne', the carved black marble slab that marks the spot where the Buddha, according to tradition, actually sat when he attained supreme Enlightenment, and bowing down before it he touched the edge with his forehead. And as he did so he was seized with a sudden inspiration. He would stay and look after the place until Buddhist monks could arrive and take over. At the age of 29 he had found his life's work.

It was not going to be as straightforward as he had thought it would be. Legally, the temple belonged to a Hindu monk, who was not pleased to have Dharmapala there, and at one point even had him thrown out and beaten up. Out of this ensued a long legal battle, which Dharmapala finally lost in 1906. Meanwhile, however, Dharmapala founded the Maha Bodhi Society to help him in his work. Initially, this work comprised the task of restoring Bodhi Gaya to something of its former splendour; but the scope of the society's activities soon expanded to involve the promotion of Buddhism in India and eventually the development of Buddhism throughout the world. A natural extension of this work was to set up, in 1892, the Maha Bodhi Journal.

In 1893 Dharmapala was invited to attend the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago as representative of 'Southern Buddhism' – which was the term applied at that time to the Theravada. He was a great success. In fact some journalists paid him what they imagined to be the ultimate compliment, and compared him to Jesus. So by his early thirties he was already a global figure, and he continued to travel and give lectures and establish viharas around the world during the next forty years. At the same time he concentrated on establishing schools and hospitals in Ceylon and building temples and viharas in India. Amongst the most important of the temples he built was one at Sarnath, where the Buddha first taught the Dharma. Here, in 1933, when he was already a very sick man in a wheelchair, he was ordained a bhikkhu, and he died there in December of the same year, aged sixty-nine.

Dharmapala was a leading figure in initiating two outstanding features of Buddhism in the twentieth century. He was a great pioneer in the revival of Buddhism in India after it had been virtually extinct there for several centuries. And he was the first Buddhist in modern times to preach the Dharma in three continents, in Asia, in America, and in Europe.

Clearly, Dharmapala led a very active life. However, he invariably started his day, often before dawn, with two hours of meditation. In his younger days in Ceylon he had failed to find a meditation teacher; for various reasons, the practice of meditation there had simply died out. But in his twenties, he met a Burmese lay yogi who was able to give him some instruction. And the practice that we may say fuelled his life and work, was the metta bhavana, the cultivation of universal

loving-kindness. So this is a vitally important aspect of his life. He wasn't simply a Buddhist activist, flitting from one Buddhist conference to another. His work for Buddhism sprang out of a deep experience of Buddhism – an experience that is enormously difficult to achieve without regular meditation.

One other significant aspect of his life was that he was the first anagarika – that is, a celibate, full-time worker for Buddhism – in modern times. He wasn't, until his last months, a bhikkhu – but he wasn't a layman in the ordinary sense either. It seems that he took a vow of celibacy or brahmacharya at the age of eight, and remained faithful to it all his life. And he also wore a yellow robe. However, it wasn't of the traditional bhikkhu pattern, and he didn't shave his head. He felt, so it would appear, that the observance of all the vinaya rules would have got in the way of his work, especially as he flew around the world.

Ultimately, the key to Dharmapala's life and work is before one's eyes wherever one opens his voluminous diaries. At the top of every alternate page he wrote: 'The only Refuge for him who aspires to true perfection is the Buddha alone.' This is what he reminded himself, every day of the year, year after year. Going for Refuge is the fundamental, decisive, definitive act of the Buddhist life. It is what makes us Buddhists, and it is what unites us all as Buddhists.

Alexandra David-Neel

Born in Paris in 1868, under the Emperor Napoleon III, Alexandra David-Neel died in southern France in 1969, under President Pompidou. She would have worn crinolines as a young woman, and she survived to see young women in mini-skirts. So this gives us some idea of the historical parameters of her very long life.

Her father was wealthy middle class – Protestant, socialist, and an ardent republican, whereas her mother was a Belgian Catholic, and an ardent supporter of the Belgian monarchy. Alexandra David – as she originally was – seems to have been very much closer to her father. Her mother had wanted a son, who would become a Catholic bishop; and a daughter was a bitter disappointment to her. So Alexandra grew up in these circumstances something of a tomboy. She went to various Catholic convents, but she remained a tomboy, and from the age of sixteen she started running away from home. She would come back again, but before long she was bicycling – this was in the 1880s – all the way to Spain. She also visited Holland, England, Italy, again all on her own, and still a teenager.

On her second visit to England she came in contact with Theosophists. She started reading up in the library of the British Museum the more alternative mystical traditions – Gnosticism, Catharism, and so on. And on her return to France she settled in Paris with a group of French Theosophists. She started to study Sanskrit, and in doing so came across the Lalitavistara, an imaginative and poetic, not to say legendary, life of the Buddha. However, this was not in fact her first contact with Buddhism. At the age of thirteen she had apparently come across one of the most ancient and beautiful Buddhist legends, the Jataka tale of how the Buddha, in one of his previous incarnations, had given his body to a starving tigress and her cubs. She had thought, at thirteen, that this was the most beautiful story she had ever heard.

Living in Paris she was also in contact with Buddhist art, because the Musée Guimet in Paris housed one of the most famous collections of oriental art in the world. There, one day, she stood before a magnificent Japanese Buddha image, joined her hands together, and bowed in salutation before it. She continued to study other religions, especially Hinduism, but she already regarded herself as a Buddhist.

At the age of twenty-one she came of age and inherited some money, which she spent on a trip to India, on her own, where she met maharajahs and swamis. She returned to Europe virtually penniless. She made a little money out of the occasional bit of journalism, but it wasn't enough. So she trained as a singer, and supported herself as a singer for seven years. She had quite a successful and rather colourful career as a singer, and in the course of it learned a lot about human nature. But her voice was evidently not very well trained because it started to deteriorate, so she decided, regretfully, that she would have to get married.

In 1904, at the age of thirty-six, Alexandra David married Philippe Neel, an aristocratic French engineer, then aged forty. They lived in French North Africa for a number of years, during which her beloved father died and she published her

first book on Buddhism, called '*Buddhist modernism and the Buddhism of the Buddha*'.

Alexandra David-Neel left for the East again in 1911, and she did not return for fourteen years. She travelled in Ceylon, India, Sikkim, Nepal, Japan, China, and Tibet, and continued her study of Buddhism. Not only that – she was putting what she studied into practice, which was unusual at that time. Not only was it unusual for a student of Buddhism to practise it; what she was doing was also unusual in another way. She met the thirteenth Dalai Lama – in exile in Kalimpong after an invasion by the Chinese – and he was astonished, on asking how she had become a Buddhist, to be told that it had been by reading books. He had never heard of such a thing.

In Sikkim, she met the Gomchen of Lhachen who was famous as a meditator and yogi (Gomchen meaning 'great meditator'). She became his disciple and spent two years there, practising meditation and studying Tibetan. She also adopted a Sikkimese boy – Lama Yongden as he afterwards became – and he remained with her for the rest of his life.

David-Neel's husband seems to have taken her extended absence very well. She wrote to him every day, so clearly she was fond of him, though equally clearly she could be fond of him only from a distance. In return he sent her money regularly – and she evidently needed plenty of it, to be frank. She usually travelled in some style, with a number of servants and a good deal of equipment.

There was one journey she took in rather less than grand style, and that was her famous journey to Lhasa. At that time foreigners were prohibited from entering Tibet, so she travelled in disguise. Her only companion was Yongden, who took the part of a travelling lama, with herself as his old mother. They were four months travelling on foot. They travelled through China to approach Lhasa from the north-east, crossing vast deserts, scaling lofty mountains and braving bandits, starvation, and landslides to reach their destination. They spent two months in Lhasa and David-Neel subsequently wrote 'The Journey of a Parisienne to Lhasa'.

In 1925 she returned to France with Yongden and settled in the Alps of Provence, at Digne. By now she was a rather famous elderly lady, giving lectures and writing books. She took a journey east just once more, in 1939, but this proved to be ill-timed. The Second World War broke out and the two of them were stranded in a small town in south-east Tibet called Darsendo (or Dhartsendo) for six years. Her husband was dead by the time they returned and Yongden died in 1955, but she continued to write. It was during this last period of her life that I had some contact with her. We exchanged letters and she contributed to magazines I was editing; and I noticed that her handwriting, despite her years, remained firm and clear.

Her life was noteworthy in three particular respects. First of all, she was one of the first Westerners to take Buddhism seriously – i.e. to take it as a way of life, not just as a subject for scholarly study. Secondly there was her readiness to defy convention, especially when convention stood in the way of the realization of her cherished ideals. Nowadays, when defying convention is often a meaningless

convention in itself, it’s difficult for us to realize how strong, how rigid, certain conventions were during her lifetime. For her, being unconventional took real courage. Thirdly and lastly, she showed what a really determined woman is capable of. Her life is thus an inspiration to all Buddhists, but perhaps to Buddhist women in particular.

B.R. Ambedkar

So far we have looked at individuals from wealthy, middle-class families. By contrast, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar came from the very bottom of the social heap. He was born in 1891 at Mhow in central India into an Untouchable Hindu family, and this background to his life is very much what his career was about. To have any idea of what Ambedkar achieved one has to be clear about what this term 'Untouchable' really means.

Hindu society is divided into castes, with the Brahmins, the priestly caste, at the top, and the Shudras, or labouring caste, at the bottom, and others, with all sorts of subdivisions, in between. Having been born into a particular caste you can't get out of it – it is regarded as very wrong even to try. As for 'Untouchables', they are even lower than Shudras, and in a sense they are outside the caste system altogether. They are called 'Untouchables' because any contact with them pollutes so-called 'caste Hindus'. Even their shadow pollutes.

Traditionally, Untouchables lived in ghettoes of their own, outside the main community. They could engage only in very menial occupations such as removing night-soil, and they would serve the caste Hindu villagers in this way in return for a few scraps of food. They weren't allowed to enter Hindu temples or attend Hindu schools. They had no economic or political rights – they could not even own property. They were not allowed to better themselves in any way. Once an Untouchable, always an Untouchable – at least, so far as this life was concerned.

This system had been rigidly in force for a thousand years (and to all intents and purposes it still is in many areas). But when Ambedkar was born there were already faint signs that it was beginning to weaken. The rule of the British over India was no doubt unfortunate in many ways, but for the Untouchables it did have its advantages, because the British army accepted Untouchables into its ranks. In fact it had Untouchable regiments, and Ambedkar's father belonged to one of these. Members of these regiments were given a certain amount of education, and some, including Ambedkar's father, even became army schoolmasters.

With help and encouragement from his father, Ambedkar became a brilliant student, and at the age of seventeen was the first Untouchable to matriculate. He was given a scholarship by a liberal Indian prince, and eventually graduated in politics and economics. He studied further at Columbia University and then at the London School of Economics, and also qualified as a barrister. He returned to India in 1923, aged thirty-two, and took his place as one of the most highly gifted and qualified men in Indian public life.

However, he had not equipped himself so comprehensively for a political career out of self-interest. He never forgot that he himself was an Untouchable – nor was he allowed to. Many Indians continued to treat him as an Untouchable, and this was a source of great disappointment and bitterness to him; but it only hardened his resolve to devote his life to the uplift of his people. He founded newspapers, he started schools and colleges, he entered politics, he fought legal battles; and we

may say that from 1923 until his death in 1956, the story of his life is inseparable from the history of modern India.

In 1927 Dr Ambedkar focused attention on the problems faced by his people by provoking the 'Chowdar Tank case'. In the town of Mahad in what is now Maharashtra state, Untouchables were not allowed to take water from this tank until 1927, when it was opened to them by the local municipality. Whether or not the Chowdar tank actually belonged to the municipality would be later contested. But meanwhile, Ambedkar held a conference of 3,000 Untouchables at Mahad, and at its conclusion led them to the edge of the tank to drink from it.This may all seem a very tame business to us – a local dispute over who is allowed to use a water tank, and 3,000 people gathering together in order to dare to make use of what has been made available to them. But in India in those days it was a terrific, extraordinary, revolutionary thing to do. There was a furious reaction from the caste Hindus, and some of Ambedkar's followers were assaulted in one way or another for their impious – in the eyes of the caste Hindus – temerity. The Untouchables had, by drawing water from the tank, polluted it.

The question now was how to purify the tank again. Brahmins were called together, and they took 108 earthenware pots of water from the tank and mixed the water with curds, with milk, with cow-dung, and with cow's urine. Then the pots, with the water and the aforementioned 'purifying' elements, were put back in the tank and Vedic mantras were recited. In this way the tank was purified. Naturally, a response to this insulting procedure was called for on the part of the Untouchables under Ambedkar, and it had to be an appropriate response, one that would get to the heart of the issue. In the same year, 1927, they burned the Manusmrti, or the 'Laws of Manu'. The significance of this book as a symbol resided in the fact that it is the source of all the laws regarding caste. It lays down who can eat with whom, who can marry whom, who can touch whom; and it also lays down how those who infringe those laws should be punished. Thus, for example, it is decreed that any Shudra who presumes to teach Brahmins their duty should have boiling oil poured into his mouth and into his ears. The burning of the Manusmrti had the desired effect. It shocked orthodox Hindus all over India, and it symbolized the repudiation by the Untouchables of the authority of the Hindu scriptures.

The man generally lauded nowadays as the great hero of this period in India, during the drive towards independence, is of course Mahatma Gandhi. But the Untouchables cannot see him in quite this idealized light. Gandhi was himself a caste Hindu who claimed to represent the Untouchables as well as caste Hindus, but the Untouchables did not recognize him in this role. They believed that only an Untouchable could safeguard their interests.

Gandhi had already agreed that Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs should have separate electorates, and Ambedkar argued that in a democratic India there should be separate electorates for Untouchables as well. This was because Untouchables did not want to be governed by caste Hindus. However, in 1932 Gandhi resisted Ambedkar's demands by going on one of his 'fasts to death', and during the period of the fast Ambedkar described himself as the most hated man in India. Gandhi did

indeed come close to death, and in the end Ambedkar was forced to compromise. If Gandhi had fasted to death Ambedkar would have faced the prospect of the wholesale murder of Untouchables by caste Hindus.

In 1935 Ambedkar's wife died. He had married her very young, when he was sixteen and she just nine; only one of their five children had survived. By this time his political position was hardening. He no longer believed in the possibility of reform within Hinduism. He was convinced that the caste Hindus were not going to change their ways; they weren't going to treat the Untouchables as human beings. And in 1935 he made his famous declaration that though he had been born a Hindu, he would not die one.

In 1947 Ambedkar became Law Minister in the first government of the independent state of India, but he resigned from the Cabinet four years later because of fierce opposition from caste Hindus – even in the Cabinet – to his attempts to reform Hindu law. It was at about this time that I myself had some correspondence and then a series of meetings with him.

At the end of 1954 Ambedkar announced that he would devote the remainder of his life to the propagation of Buddhism in India. This was not a sudden decision. He had been a student of Buddhism for some time, and had known something about it ever since he was sixteen, when he had been given a copy of the Marathi translation of Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, a life of the Buddha in English verse (which had also been an early discovery and favourite of Dharmapala's). Over the years Ambedkar had gradually become convinced that Buddhism was the best religion for himself and for the Untouchable community as a whole. There were various reasons for his choice, but the main ones were: firstly, that Buddhism did not conflict with the dictates of reason; secondly, that it did not condone man's inhumanity to man, and it certainly did not condone the caste system; and thirdly, that it was of Indian origin, it was not the product of a foreign culture.

So in 1956, in a ceremony at Nagpur in central India, Dr Ambedkar became a Buddhist – along with 380,000 of his followers. The conversions in Nagpur sparked off others all over India. It was the greatest event for Buddhism in India for many hundreds of years. Though these were 'mass conversions' the effect on the individuals who took part, who became Buddhists at that time, was profound. I used to ask people, months or even years afterwards, 'What difference has becoming a Buddhist meant for you?' And nine times out of ten they would reply, 'Now that I'm a Buddhist I feel free.' That seems to have been the most important aspect of the experience: a sense of freedom. They felt socially, psychologically, spiritually free.

Six weeks later, Ambedkar was dead, at the age of 64. I was in Nagpur at the time and I well remember the reaction of shock and grief that swept through the ex-Untouchable community. There were fears that the conversion movement would simply collapse. But happily it didn't collapse, and it continues to this day. The significance of Dr Ambedkar's life and work is exceptionally profound and far-reaching. The problem he faced was how to lift up his people, socially, economically, educationally – in every respect. And he felt that the only overall

solution to this problem was a change in religion. It wasn't enough just to reject Hinduism, just to leave the religion that generally condoned the caste system. Ambedkar himself was a deeply religious man; he believed that religion was essential to human life, that we cannot really live without it. So for him there was no question of pursuing, for instance, the communist option. He believed that a real social and economic revolution was possible only on the basis of a spiritual revolution.

It was for this reason that he inaugurated what we now call the 'Dhamma revolution'. This is not just a nominal change of religion, but a transformation of one's whole life in every aspect. It is not just individual transformation, but even collective transformation as well. This is the movement that Ambedkar set in motion. He showed that a change in religion, even in the midst of the twentieth century, could bring about a change for the better in the lives of millions of people.

The conversion movement in India is also of profound significance for Buddhism itself. Ambedkar was well aware that Buddhism had already disappeared once from India, and having revived it he didn't want it to disappear again. So he looked at why it had disappeared. He saw that one of the principal factors leading to its decline was the separation which had developed between the monks and the laity.

The monks lived together in monasteries, and in the course of centuries these monasteries became bigger and bigger, each in the end housing thousands of monks leading self-contained lives apart from the laity. So without much contact with the monks and without any lay ordination, the lay-people began to feel less and less like they themselves were Buddhists at all, and they came more and more under the influence of the Hindu brahmins. And this process was accelerated after the great monasteries were destroyed by Muslim invaders in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries. Thus eventually, the lay Buddhists were simply absorbed into the Hindu community. Buddhism disappeared from India, and only ruins marked what it once had been.

On the basis of this analysis of the decline and fall of Indian Buddhism, Ambedkar decided that there had to be ordination for lay-people corresponding to monastic ordination for monks. He called this lay ordination 'Dhammadiksha', and it consisted of two parts: first, taking the traditional Three Refuges and five precepts; and secondly – and this was quite new – taking twenty-two vows.

These twenty-two vows were devised by Ambedkar himself, and their purpose was to clearly and completely separate the new Buddhists from their old Hindu religion. They constituted an explicit renunciation of every vestige of Hinduism, of every Hindu practice, like, for example, offering animal sacrifices to gods and goddesses. These vows made it clear what it was to be a Hindu and what it was to be a Buddhist, and that it was not possible to be both. They helped to root out a very commonly held belief in India at this time that if you were a Buddhist you were necessarily also a Hindu, that Buddhism was an accretion on the main body of Hinduism. I myself remember a Hindu swami asking me after my ordination

why I had not done the job properly and become a Hindu monk. ‘Hinduism is like the great ocean,’ he said, ‘Buddhism is just a little stream.’ In fact, any idea that Buddhism might be combined with another faith, whether Hinduism or Christianity, represents a serious confusion of thought. Dr Ambedkar thought that this principle was so important that it needed to be embodied in vows taken as part of the ordination ceremony.

The way it was done at Nagpur on 14 October 1956 was as follows: Dr Ambedkar took the Three Refuges and five precepts from U Chandramani, a very senior bhikkhu. After this, Ambedkar publicly recited his twenty-two vows. He then proceeded to administer the Refuges and precepts and the twenty-two vows himself to the 380,000 of his followers who were assembled there at Nagpur. In this way he established a very significant principle.

Ambedkar was initiated into Buddhism by a monk, but his followers were initiated into Buddhism by a layman. Thus the monk and the layman were placed, in a sense, on an equal footing. Dr Ambedkar was asserting the fact that it is Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels – the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha – which makes one a Buddhist, not one’s lifestyle. Going for Refuge is the primary act of a Buddhist; lifestyle – whether one is monk or lay – is secondary.

Lama Govinda

Lama Govinda was rather a mysterious figure – particularly when he was Ernst Lothar Hoffmann – which is the name with which he began life. We know very little about his early years. He was born in 1898 in Germany, into a middle-class family of partly Spanish descent, but his mother died when he was three, and he was brought up by her sister. He originally wanted to be a mining engineer, but developed an increasing interest in philosophy, especially Schopenhauer. He went on to study comparative religion, and Buddhism in particular, until, towards the end of the First World War, he was called up to spend two years in the German army.

After the war he took up residence in Capri, where began a very important period in his life. He studied Pali, he took up art and a bit of archaeological research, and he met an elderly German lady who became, for much of the rest of his life, a sort of foster-mother. He started practising meditation, and he started as well to make pastel drawings of the meditative states he experienced. So he was evidently already making the connection between meditation and art which would later be the subject of much of his thinking.

In 1928, aged thirty, Govinda moved to Ceylon – his foster-mother as well, of course. For a couple of years he studied Pali and Abhidhamma with the famous German bhikkhu, Nyanatiloka, during which period he took the name of Govinda and became an anagarika. He also visited Burma and researched cases of alleged recollection of previous lives, a subject he was always interested in.

His next move was to India, and at a Buddhist conference in Darjeeling he came into contact for the first time with Tibetan Buddhism, which thereafter exercised a compelling influence on his life and work. There are not many firm dates in what we know of Govinda's life, but about 1930 he settled – again with his foster-mother – in Ghoom near Darjeeling, where he met his Tibetan guru, the famous Tomo Geshe Rimpoche. During the next few years he was based partly in Ghoom and partly in Shantiniketan, the forest university established by Rabindranath Tagore a hundred miles north of Calcutta.

Govinda lectured, he wrote, he travelled – until in 1942 he was interned by the British because of his German descent. Conditions in the camp near Dehradun were very mild: he studied Chinese, he studied the I Ching, and he enjoyed the companionship of Nyanaponika, another German disciple of Nyanatiloka. After the war he returned to Ghoom and to Shantiniketan, and in 1947 he married a former student of his at Shantiniketan, Rati Petit, who became known as Li Gotami.

In 1948 they made their celebrated journey to Tsaparang in western Tibet, and they made it just in time, because within a year or two the Chinese had occupied the whole of Tibet. The two of them spent several months working in conditions of great hardship, sketching, and photographing ruined Buddhist temples and monasteries, and copying ancient frescoes. They were greatly impressed, not so much by the religious life they found there as by the vastness of the open spaces,

by the views, by the brilliant colours, by the light, and of course by the ancient art that they discovered.

In 1952 Govinda announced the formation of the Arya Maitreya Mandala, an organization through which he hoped to spread Buddhism, especially Tibetan Buddhism, in the West. Shortly afterwards, he and Li Gotami moved to Almora in the foothills of the western Himalayas, where they remained for the next twenty-five years, and where Govinda had the most creative phase of his career, producing at least two Buddhist literary classics: the semi-autobiographical Way of the White Clouds, documenting the journey to western Tibet; and Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism. In the sixties and seventies they made several trips to Europe and America, where there was a growing interest in Buddhism, and they spent their last years in San Francisco, where Govinda died in 1985, aged 87. Li Gotami died in India about three years later.

I personally got to know Lama Govinda really quite well. We discovered that we had a good deal in common, especially in our approach to Buddhism. In a letter he wrote to me four days before he died he made a couple of points that seem to indicate what the overall direction of his life and work had been. Firstly: 'I'm a great admirer of Italian art and, like you, I always uphold the importance of European culture. Without knowing the roots of our own culture how can we absorb the essence of Buddhist culture?' And secondly: 'Now it is up to the next generation to take Buddhism out of the merely academic atmosphere and make it a living experience.'

Lama Anagarika Govinda always emphasized that intellectual understanding and the observance of rules wasn't enough, but that Buddhism could be made a living experience by means of meditation, together with ritual and particularly colour – colour in the full, literal sense – in the spiritual life. He also stressed the importance of what he called 'creative imagination' and thus the importance of art. As a meditator and an artist himself, he did not see these two activities as completely different. In fact, he saw a sort of parallelism between them. The way he put it was that in meditation we pass from the world of outward expression to the world of inner experience; and in art we pass from the world of inner experience to the world of outward expression.

Edward Conze

Eberhart Julius Dietrich Conze was born in London in 1904 of mixed German, French, and Dutch ancestry. His father belonged to the German landed aristocracy, and his mother to what he himself would have called the 'plutocracy'. His background was Protestant, though his mother became a Roman Catholic in later life. He seems to have had a rather bad relationship with his mother – like Alexandra David-Neel, though obviously for different reasons.

He was born in England simply because his father happened to be posted there as German Vice-Consul, but this meant that he had British nationality, should he ever need it (which he would). He was educated at various German universities and with a flair for languages picked up a command of fourteen of them, including Sanskrit, by the age of twenty-four. Like many other Europeans, he came into contact with Theosophy quite early on. But he also took up astrology. He took it seriously, remaining a keen astrologer all his life. And while still a young man, he wrote a very substantial book called *The Principle of Contradiction*. Apparently his mother said that she was not surprised he'd written such a book since he himself was a bundle of contradictions.

During the rise to power of Hitler, Conze found himself so strongly opposed to the Nazi ideology that he joined the Communist Party and even made a serious study of Marxist thought. It seems that for a while he was the leader of the communist movement in Bonn, and his life was consequently in some danger.

In 1933 he came to England, having earlier taken the precaution of renewing his British nationality, and he arrived at the age of twenty-nine, virtually without money or possessions. He supported himself by teaching German, and taking evening classes, and he became a member of the Labour Party. He met a lot of prominent figures and intellectuals in the Labour movement and was not impressed. He had, after all, been to a whole series of German universities. He met Trades Union leaders and he met Pandit Nehru and Krishna Menon of the India League and he was not impressed by any of them either. He was not easily impressed.

He became very active in the socialist movement in Britain, lecturing and writing books and pamphlets, until eventually he became disillusioned with politics. At the age of thirty-five he found himself in a state of intellectual turmoil and collapse. Even his marriage had failed. Indeed, in his memoirs he admits, 'I am one of those unfortunate people who can neither live with women nor without them.'

At this point he discovered – or rather rediscovered – Buddhism. At the age of thirteen he had read *Gleanings in Buddha Fields* by Lafcadio Hearn, which I myself read in my own teens (and at the beginning of each chapter he would have read quotations from the *Diamond S*utra, as if presaging his future life's work). However, Conze's first significant contact with Buddhism was at this mid-point in his life, at the beginning of the Second World War, and it was through the writings of D.T. Suzuki. They were literally his salvation.

After this there was no turning back. Conze devoted the rest of his life to Buddhism, and in particular to translating the Prajnaparamita or Perfection of Wisdom sutras, which are the fundamental scriptures of the Mahayana. But he wasn't just a scholar in the academic sense. During the war he lived on his own in a caravan in the New Forest, and he practised meditation, following very seriously the instructions given by Buddhaghosha in the Visuddhimagga, and achieving some degree of meditative experience.

After the war he moved to Oxford and re-married. In 1951 he brought out *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, a very successful book which is still in print. However, his real achievement over the following twenty years was to translate altogether more than thirty texts comprising the Prajnaparamita sutras, including of course two of the most well-known of all Buddhist texts, the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra*.

It was in connection with these translations that I myself came into contact with him. I started publishing his Selected Sayings from the Perfection of Wisdom in a magazine I was editing called Stepping Stones in about 1951. We corresponded, and when I came to England in 1964 we met a number of times and found that we agreed on quite a lot of issues.

In the sixties and seventies he lectured at several universities in the United States, and he went down well with the students. However, he was very outspoken, and gained the disapproval of the university authorities and some of his colleagues. With the combination of his communist past and his candid criticism of the American involvement in Vietnam, he was eventually obliged to take his talents elsewhere. He died in 1979.

Dr Conze was a complex figure, and it is not easy to assess his overall significance. He was of course a Middle European intellectual refugee, fleeing from Germany before the war like so many others. But he wasn't at all representative of this dominant strain in twentieth century intellectual life, because he was very critical of many trends in modern thought. He was a self-confessed élitist, which is usually something people are ashamed of nowadays, but he wasn't ashamed of it at all. Indeed, he entitled his autobiography *Memoirs of a Modern Gnostic*, believing as he did that Gnosticism was essentially élitist. Nor did he approve of either democracy or feminism, which makes him a veritable ogre of 'political incorrectness'.

He is certainly representative of a whole pre-war generation in the West which became disillusioned with Marxism, especially with Marxism in its Soviet form. Where he differed from others was in the fact that he did not really lose his sense of faith. He did not simply become disillusioned while carrying on within the milieu he was familiar with. He transferred his uncompromising idealism from politics to Buddhism.

Dr Conze was one of the great Buddhist translators, comparable with the indefatigable Chinese translators Kumarajiva and Hsuan-tsang of the fifth and seventh centuries respectively. It is especially significant, I think, that as a scholar

of Buddhism he also tried to practise it, especially meditation. This was very unusual at the time he started his work, and he was regarded then – in the forties and fifties – as being something of an eccentric. Scholars were not supposed to have any personal involvement in their subject. They were supposed to be 'objective'. So he was a forerunner of a whole new breed of Western scholars in Buddhism who are actually practising Buddhists.

This overview of some great Buddhist lives does not in any way provide a comprehensive view of the achievements of the great Buddhists of the twentieth century. For that, we would have to introduce many others. The thirteenth Dalai Lama, the Zen scholar and translator, D.T. Suzuki, Dr G.P. Malalasekera of Sri Lanka, Bhikkhu Buddhadasa of Thailand, the great Chinese Ch'an meditation master the Venerable Hsu Yun, and the great Chinese abbot Tai Hsu are just some of them.

However, I hope I have been able to suggest what we may gain, as Buddhists, from reading, studying, reflecting, and meditating on the lives, the biographies, and memoirs of Buddhists who have lived, in one way or another, truly inspiring lives. They enable us to see Buddhism being actually lived. Purely doctrinal studies – good and necessary though they may be – sometimes give us the impression that Buddhism is rather remote from our own twentieth century lives. Biographies help to redress this balance. After all, Buddhism began with lives; it didn't begin with books. Buddhism began with the lives of the Buddha and his Enlightened disciples.

While preparing these sketches of great Buddhists I noticed two things. I noticed first of all that the five were all very different. They had very different characters and they grew up in very different circumstances. In many ways they did very different things. But they were all great Buddhists. This is very important. It reminds us that though we are all Buddhists, though we all go for Refuge, we don't all have to be the same; we don't have to live in the same way; we don't have to do the same things. This is because what unites us is more important than what divides us.

The second thing I noticed was that there were certain qualities which, despite their differences, all five seemed to possess. To begin with, they were all very single-minded. Once they had discovered their purpose in life, they never wavered. Then, they were all characterized by fearlessness. They were also all unconventional. And they were self-motivated. They were autonomous individuals, they 'did their own thing', they went their own way, sometimes in the face of tremendous opposition. They were all true individuals.

In short, they were all heroes, in the best sense of the term. We need to cherish our heroes and heroines. We need to admire them, we need to cherish their memory, we need to rejoice in their merits. We need to appreciate that our great Buddhists, whether of the twentieth or any other century, are among our greatest and most precious possessions."

End of extract.

Suggested questions

1. What are the principle qualities that Sangharakshita considers make for a 'great Buddhist'? Can you think of other qualities that should be included in his list?

2. Do any of the five Buddhists that he mentions strike a particular chord with you? If so, why do you think that might be?

3. Can you think of other figures from the twentieth century who you would consider to be 'great Buddhists'? If so, what is it about their lives that you consider to be great?

4. Who are your own spiritual role models or heroes and heroines? What is it about them that inspires you? Do you feel that you cherish them sufficiently?

Week Two – Introducing the Refuge Tree

This week we will be looking at the symbol of the Refuge Tree as a whole and the context within which it is usually found i.e. the Going for Refuge and Prostration practice. You may well want to have an image of the Refuge Tree to hand to refer to. A copy of Aloka's line drawing of the Refuge Tree can be found in Kulananda's book. You can also see and purchase a copy of his painting of the refuge Tree (which resides at Guhyaloka Retreat Centre in Spain) from *Clear Vision*:

http://bit.ly/2z6Omy

A later painting of the same subject in different style is also available from Padmaloka online:

http://www.padmaloka.org.uk/resources/shop

The following talk by Dhammadinna was given at the combined convention of the Western Buddhist Order in 1991, shortly after the new Going for Refuge and Prostration practice was introduced into the Order. It gives a succinct and inspiring overview of the Refuge Tree and its significance within our own tradition.

Beginning of talk

I shall approach the subject under four main headings. First I shall say a little about the four Foundation Yogas in general – the four preliminary practices in Tibetan Buddhism – to set the practice in that context. Secondly, I shall look at how and why this version of the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice emerged in the Triratna Buddhist Order. Then I shall describe the practice, particularly the elements which are different from other Going for Refuge practices. Lastly, I shall discuss its significance for us.

The Four Foundation Yogas

The four Foundation Yogas are the basic practice in Tibetan Buddhism before more advanced practices are taken on. They are the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice, the Development of the Bodhicitta, the Visualisation and Mantra Recitation of Vajrasattva, and the Offering of the Mandala. These four are often followed by the Guru Yoga. These practices are the foundation of spiritual life in Tibetan Buddhism. They are undertaken by practitioners of all the Tibetan Buddhist schools, although sometimes in a different order and in different ways according to the school to which one belongs. I noticed recently, for example, in *The Cult of Tārā*, that in the White Tārā practice, which is preceded by the Four Foundation Yogas, the Vajrasattva practice is performed first, before the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice. It says that the old writings do put Vajrasattva in this place: 'We need to clean the vessel first before Going for Refuge.'

The important figure in the Refuge Tree practice in Tibetan Buddhism is the central figure. That figure changes according to the school to which one belongs

(and even within schools there can be differences). For Nyingmapas, Padmasambhava is usually in the centre; for Kagyupas, Milarepa; for Gelugpas, Tsongkhapa. The depiction of the Refuge Tree therefore changes according to the lineage to which one belongs, but there are also other ways in which the Refuge Tree differs. Some Refuge Trees are extremely complex, with hundreds of figures on them. Some are extremely simple. Some might have only Padmasambhava in his various forms. Again *The Cult of Tārā*, in that section on the White Tārā practice, states that in the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice which precedes the main practice there are only five figures on the Refuge Tree: Amitābha in the centre, Tārā on a lower lotus petal, Śākyamuni, Avalokiteśvara and Prajñāpāramitā. Nyingmapa Refuge Trees tend to the chaotic, with a great many Tantric figures on them. Gelugpa Refuge Trees tend to be rather structured and ordered. The point is that the Refuge Tree is an image or symbol which is flexible and changes according to different needs. I shall revert later to that principle of flexibility within the practice.

Although the basic structure of the Refuge Tree is tree-shaped, it is in fact a lotus flower in most cases. In some Kagyupa practices it is a wish-fulfilling tree, but usually it is a lotus tree with five lotuses. The tree, or lotus, or plant, is a symbol of growth and change. It is also very central, for the tree also symbolises the central axis of the universe. The basis, then, of the Refuge Tree practice is flexibility, change, growth, dynamism. It is really a three-dimensional mandala.

This way of approaching Going for Refuge – placing figures on a Refuge Tree and doing the Visualisation and Prostration practice – probably arose out of the Vajrayāna tendency to work everything out and make it specific and explicit in terms of body, speech and mind in practice and action. It is a total practice – those who have done it know that it does involve body, speech and mind for it involves visualisation, recitation of verses, and prostrations.

How the practice arose

In Bhante's *History of My Going for Refuge*, the chapter 'More Light from Tibetan Buddhism' begins with a discussion of Bhante's discovery of the translation of Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, which contains a whole chapter devoted to the topic of Going for Refuge entitled Taking Refuge. Bhante found that chapter illuminating in many respects, but realised that Going for Refuge is dealt with there as a stage on the way of the arising of the Bodhicitta (see p. 56ff). Later, in his own explorations of Going for Refuge, Bhante saw the arising of the Bodhicitta as a dimension of Going for Refuge. He explains that Going for Refuge is the central, unique spiritual experience of which the arising of the Bodhicitta, though crucially important, is one dimension. Although in theory the Going for Refuge remains, within Mahāyāna Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism:

> *"…a means to the arising of the Bodhicitta, in the course of centuries it became, in the hands of certain teachers, something very much more. It was transformed, in fact, into a virtually independent spiritual practice wherein the entire personality of the practitioner was involved in a particularly moving and significant manner."*

He then describes how, having had an initiation of Padmasambhava from Khachu Rimpoche, he came across a xylograph of the *Tharpe Delam*, a Nyingmapa text, in the Kalimpong bazaar, which contains the Four Mula Yogas in the Nyingmapa tradition. With more instruction from Khachu Rimpoche, he took up this practice. Although he could do the practice for only two years because he then returned to England, he states: "*I had a more intense and more sustained experience of Going for Refuge than ever before*," and later he says that by undertaking the practice and becoming deeply absorbed in the experience of Going for Refuge, it becomes, "*No longer possible... to think of the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice simply as one of the four mula yogas, or of the act of Going for Refuge itself simply as a means to the arising of the Bodhicitta,", so the practice becomes, "A spiritual practice in its own right*." He adds that the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice represents, *"A transposition of the act of Going for Refuge into the rich and colourful mode of the Indo-Tibetan Tantric tradition. As such, it also [represents] a restoration of Going for Refuge to something like its original place in Buddhism and in the Buddhist life*." I shall return to some of these points later.

I shall now examine how the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice of Śākyamuni, in the form that we have been doing it, came about in the Triratna Buddhist Order and in the Triratna Buddhist Community.

The Padmasambhava prostration practice, of course, came through Bhante. He gave that practice to certain Order Members many years ago, and individual Order Members took it up. Some Order Members have done the 100,000 prostrations in that practice. It became quite popular in the late 1970s. On the Vine Hall 1978 Order Convention we did the practice collectively every day.

Thus a good many people took up that form of the practice. In the last few years, however, particularly in what is known as the new Men's Ordination Process, Subhuti and the team presumably felt that, in order to enable Mitras to deepen their Going for Refuge, it would be good for them too to take up the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice, and the practice they adopted was the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice of Padmasambhava. We also introduced this practice into the Women's Process. Eventually Subhuti began to feel that it was no longer completely appropriate for the people doing it. It is interesting that that decision did not arise in a superficial way. It was not a case of, "Oh, let's change the practice", or "This isn't working." I think that the Padmasambhava practice was really explored. Subhuti himself produced talks called *The Mythic Dimension*, and Aloka produced a booklet on the *Prostration Practice of Padmasambhava* which went into it in very great detail. It was as a result of quite a deep exploration of doing that practice on successive Going for Refuge retreats, for the purpose of helping Mitras and Order Members deepen their Going for Refuge, that Subhuti came to feel that it was not entirely appropriate.

There were a number of reasons for that feeling. In the first place, not everybody felt a connection with Padmasambhava. Some people have a response to Tibetan Buddhism very early on – that is the kind of Buddhism that they are interested in – so those people would enjoy particularly that practice with all its detailed Tantric figures. But not everybody felt that connection. Furthermore, it is a practice from

one particular tradition of Buddhism – Tibetan Buddhism – and of one particular school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Nyingmapa. Subhuti also felt that perhaps Śākyamuni was being a little undervalued. He discussed the matter with Bhante, who, after some thought and reflection, created, as it were, what we call the new Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice of the Buddha Śākyamuni.

Brief description of the practice

The practice begins in the way most visualisation practices begin, with the clear blue sky. In the clear blue sky we visualise an enormous rainbow-coloured cloud scintillating with light. On this cloud arises the stem of a gigantic white lotus flower with a single tier of petals, with a central blossom and four lotus blossoms in the four directions. On the central lotus of our new Refuge Tree sits the Buddha Śākyamuni in earth-touching mudra with his bowl, golden in colour and surrounded by golden light. A little lower down from him on his right is Dipankara, the Buddha of the past, and on his left Maitreya, the Buddha of the future. We have placed the Buddha Śākyamuni and the two other Buddhas in the centre of our mandala, very simply and straightforwardly. I am sure the significance of that is clear. (Apparently, it is not unknown in Tibetan tradition for there to be Refuge Trees with the Buddha as the central figure).

As Buddhists we Go for Refuge to the Buddha. The Buddha is our main inspiration, the source of the tradition, the source of Buddhism. We Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels and, in a sense, the Buddha is the only Refuge, because the Dharma – the teaching of the Dharma – comes from the Buddha, and the Sangha relies on the Buddha. Thus it seems fitting and apt that the Buddha Śākyamuni should be central in our own Refuge Tree. In the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice of Padmasambhava, the three Buddhas are on the front lotus, but in this practice they are moved to the centre.

It seems to me that there is a further significance in having the three Buddhas, the Buddhas of the past, present and future, on the central lotus. The three Buddhas express the continuity of the Enlightenment principle. There is one Buddha in our aeon, but at other times, wherever there is human consciousness, wherever the Dharma no longer exists, there is the possibility throughout time and space for Enlightened consciousness – a Buddha – to arise. In Buddhism history does not revolve around one figure as it does in Christianity.

Another thing that strikes me about having the Buddhas of the past, present and future there is that a Buddha of any particular aeon is said not to have had a teacher in his lifetime; he has rediscovered the Path, the Way, for himself, on his own, after it was lost. Nevertheless, in the very distant past, Śākyamuni was predicted to Enlightenment by Dipankara, and presumably he predicts Maitreya to Enlightenment at some distant point in the future when the Dharma no longer exists. I see this as an antidote to individualism even within Enlightened consciousness, because although the Buddha had no teacher in this lifetime he had a teacher in the past. This appears as an expression of spiritual communication, kalyāṇa mitratā, even at that level.

Then we move to the lotus at the front of the Refuge Tree, and on that lotus are Bhante and his teachers, the Gurus of the Present. Most people will have seen the photograph that was produced at Padmaloka with Bhante and his eight teachers, together with a sheet explaining simply who they are and their relationship to Bhante. Suvajra also gave some details of the Gurus of the Present in a talk on Sangha Day 1991 at the London Buddhist Centre, and Bhante himself gave a talk about his teachers in America in the same year, which may be published. I shall not therefore go into great detail about them.

Bhante is at the centre of the bottom row, and to his left is Jagdish Kashyap. We tend to be interested in Tibetan teachers, and I want to counteract that tendency a little by saying some more about Jagdish Kashyap than the other teachers. I remember Bhante saying that Jagdish Kashyap could sleep long hours and work long hours, and that always fascinated me as an insomniac – it seemed to be an ideal to aspire to, there seemed to be something for me to learn. There is a lot about Jagdish Kashyap in *The Thousand-Petalled Lotus*. He was Bhante's Indian Theravādin teacher whom he met at Benares University, and he taught Bhante Logic, Pāli and Abhidhamma in 1949. He was quite fat, but he could rest or be active as occasion required. In *The Thousand-Petalled Lotus* Bhante says that he would find Jagdish Kashyap, "Stretched out on his string bed like a stranded whale, sound asleep, for though he could work day and night when necessary he could sleep day and night too with equal ease." Any questions asked were answered in a clear and precise way, yet all the time he had barely bothered to wake up. When he was awake he was also animated and entertaining.

There are some other interesting aspects of Jagdish Kashyap. When asked by formalistic Sinhalese bhikkhus to which Nikāya – sect or monastic order – he belonged, he would reply, "Buddha Nikāya!" He is also quoted as saying of the formalistic Sinhalese, about their relationship to the scriptures: "*They are a set of monkeys sitting on a treasure the value of which they do not understand." He was therefore obviously outspoken, but he was also tolerant and open-minded, and he had, "A real respect for the right... of the individual to think for himself.*" He saw teaching as a sharing of knowledge without influencing thinking. When Bhante was studying with him, Bhante could read and write what he liked, and Jagdish Kashyap shared with him all his books.

He is also important in Bhante's life, and therefore in our lives, because it was to him that Bhante turned for advice after finding it difficult to be ordained in Sarnath. He pointed Bhante to U Chandramani Maha Thera in Kusinara, from whom he did receive ordination. He travelled with Bhante later on, and it was Jagdish Kashyap who said to Bhante: "Stay here in Kalimpong and work for the good of Buddhism." He is thus a very important figure in Bhante's own spiritual path and Going for Refuge.

There is a description of Jagdish Kashyap in *The Thousand-Retailed Lotus* which I like: "*His extreme corpulence gave him an air of mountainous imperturbability. At the same time, the expression of exceptional intelligence that played upon the strongly marked features of the dark brown face created an impression of vivacity,*

even as the look of gentle benignity that beamed from them seemed to invite confidence and trust.” This gives the impression of a very strong individual.

I shall say less about the other teachers. Mr. Chen is to Bhante’s right. Most people will have heard Bhante talk about Mr. Chen, the Chinese Ch’an and Vajrayāna practitioner who lived as a hermit in Kalimpong. Mr. Chen produced a book on meditation, *Buddhist Meditation, Systematic and Practical*, which is a record of conversations with Bhante about meditation. To the left above Jagdish Kashyap is Dhardo Rimpoche; I am sure I need not say anything about him.

In the centre above Bhante is Khachu Rimpoche, whom I have already mentioned. He was the abbot of the Royal Monastery of Sikkim and a senior disciple of Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche. He gave Bhante the Padmasambhava initiation and also instruction in the four Foundation Yogas, and he passed on many teachings from Jamyang Khyentse. Suvajra described, when he talked about Khachu Rimpoche’s relationship with Bhante, how he never stood on ceremony. He would just turn up, unroll his bedroll, and sleep on the floor. He was very kind and fatherly to Bhante, and made sure that Bhante had the teachings he needed. His face in the picture is kind.

Next to him is Chetul Sangye Dorje (or Chatral Rimpoche), to me a fascinating character. He is a Nyingmapa lama who gave Bhante his first Tibetan meditation practice, that of Green Tārā. There are photographs of him in *Peace Is a Fire*. I gather he was rather wild and unpredictable, and that appeals to me. In the top row above Dhardo Rimpoche is Dilgo Khyentse Rimpoche, one of the incarnations of Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche the Great. He gave Bhante several initiations including the phowa or ‘consciousness transference’ of Amitābha. Next to him, in the centre, is Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche, who is another incarnation – the main one – of Jamyang Khyentse the Great. He gave Bhante initiations of Mañjughoṣa, Avalokiteśvara, Vajrapāṇi and Tārā.

On the far right is Dudjom Rimpoche. He is pictured with a sort of crown, looking rather regal. He was the acknowledged head of the Nyingmapa tradition. He did travel as a king with a court. His approach was not to be afraid of the world but to take on the world, a sort of Tantric approach. When Bhante went to receive an initiation from him, Dudjom Rimpoche, knowing that Bhante was a westerner, appeared in flannels and a Hawaiian shirt and cowboy hat, with a lot of money in his top pocket!

There is much more information to be gleaned about those teachers. Suvajra’s talk or Bhante’s talk will fill in more details. Again there is a sense of a number of very strong individuals. I shall come back to this later when I sum up.

On the lotus to the right of the Buddha sit the Bodhisattvas. This is traditional in the Refuge Tree practice. In our particular practice are Avalokiteśvara, Mañjughoṣa, Vajrapāṇi, Tārā and Kshitigarbha. Why is Kshitigarbha there in particular? Bhante says he is the Bodhisattva who descends into hell, and that we too have to do that – descend into hell within and hell without, Sometimes we have to descend to hell within to confront our own pain and darkness, to shed light

on it and transform it. There are also people living in 'hell without' to whom we need to take the Dharma, so figuratively we descend to them. We do not join them in hell, but we are confronted with their pain if we try to help them.

On the lotus at the back are the books of the Dharma. I believe that in the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice of Padmasambhava they are Tibetan texts on the back lotus. In the Śākyamuni practice they are texts of all Yānas – Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna. One can visualise those in all their different forms. They may be written on palm leaves, they may be the Tibetan books that flip over, they may be wrapped in gold cloths, or in the form of Japanese scrolls, or engraved on jade – all the variety of ways in which people have written down the Dharma.

On the lotus at the left of Śākyamuni, similarly to the other practices, are the Arahants. Particularly emphasised are Ananda, who was the Buddha's companion; Sāriputta and Moggallāna who are great spiritual friends; Mahākassapa the great ascetic; and Dhammadinna. It is quite interesting having one's enlightened namesake in a visualisation practice. I read once – I do not remember where – that Dhammadinna had practised something like 19,000 years of brahmacarya before she became an Arahant, so one can make small steps in that direction! Bhante describes her in the *Survey* as, "Intellectually gifted."

Then we come to the sixteen Gurus of the Past, above the head of Śākyamuni. These sixteen gurus form a very interesting part of the new Refuge Tree practice. One could do years of study to find out all about them, read their life-stories and all their literature. Sometimes people say there is nothing for Order Members to study but we could have an Order study course, or even a post-Mitra study course, based on the sixteen gurus of the past. This could take us a very long time if we really absorbed their life-stories, their example, their literature, and the seminars that Bhante has led on their material. If we did this I think we would take huge leaps forward, as a Movement, in our understanding of the Dharma and our ability to communicate the Dharma to others.

In the first row above Śākyamuni are the teachers from the Japanese Buddhist tradition. We have Hakuin, Kukai, Dogen and Shinran. Hakuin is the founder of the modern Rinzai Zen school. Zen, or Ch'an, came into Japan much earlier from China, but Hakuin reformed and revitalised this school. He is supposed to have had a sharp mind and a great intellect and great literary gifts. He wrote poetry, and he is famous with us for his *Song of Meditation*. Samata found a reference to Hakuin when we were doing research, which said that his sole heritage (as a young monk, presumably) was a deserted temple. It had no proper roofs to speak of, and the stars shone through at night. Nor were there any decent floors, so it was necessary to wear gaiters and a rain hat if it rained while there were activities in the main shrine room. You can get an impression of the kind of situation he was working with, especially if you have worked on a Triratna building site! More than that – all the property that he owned was in the hands of creditors, and the priestly belongings were mortgaged to the trades-people. The quotation concludes: "*Thus was his character matured*." He was very gifted, but he did not have an easy life.

Next, Kukai, sometimes known as Kobo Daishi, the founder of the Shingon Japanese Tantric school. Again, I think people are familiar with his poetry and some of his works, particularly the poem which includes the refrain , "Have you not seen, O have you not seen…" He was a great genius in art and literature. Y. S. Hakeda says: "*He was like a majestic watershed from which streams of culture run down through history*." He was famous for his calligraphy and his poetry. Moreover, he helped the assimilation of Buddhism into the indigenous culture of Japan from China. His motto was to gain Enlightenment in this life.

Most people will have heard of the next figure, Dogen, founder of the Soto Zen school, and most people, I think, have heard readings from *The Primer of Soto Zen*. Next, Shinran, who was the founder of the Jodo Shin Shu, the True Pure Land school, which became an independent school in China and Japan. Shinran brings the whole of Pure Land Buddhism, the Buddhism of faith, to a climax. Bhante says of him that, *"His interpretation is essentially a re-reading of the original Amitābha myth in the light of the loftiest Transcendental conceptions*." (*A Survey of Buddhism*, p. 232).

Above these are the three Chinese teachers, Wei Lang, Chih-i and Hsüan-Tsang. Wei Lang, otherwise known as Hui Neng, will be familiar from the *Platform Sutra*, one of the texts that Bhante read when he was sixteen which convinced him that he was a Buddhist and always had been. Most people will also be familiar with Chih-i, the founder of the T'ien-t'ai school of China and the author of *Dhyāna for Beginners*, which many of us have studied at some time. Bhante says at the beginning of the seminar on *Dhyāna for Beginners* that the T'ien-t'ai school is a response in China to many different kinds of Buddhism coming into China at different periods. All the major Indian schools arrive in China, and Chih-i has a sort of synthetic approach. He tries to bring them all together, he uses what is useful. Bhante makes a comparison here between the T'ien-t'ai school and Triratna's work in bringing Buddhism to the West. Chih-i was another great literary person, a great scholar, but he was also a great builder and organiser. Apparently he founded 35 monasteries – imagine starting not just one Centre each but 35 Centres each!

Last on that line is Hsüan-Tsang. He was a great pilgrim and traveller He left an important record of his travels from China to India to obtain texts and teachings. It took him four years to reach Nālandā, and he brought back enormous amounts of scriptures to translate. Archaeologists and historians find his diaries very-interesting because he recorded all the monasteries he visited and included accounts of how many people were practising, how many nuns there were, what state the monasteries were in, and so on.

Then come the teachers with whom most people are probably more familiar – the Tibetan teachers Milarepa, Atisha, Padmasambhava and Tsongkhapa I need not say much about Milarepa, for we have all heard songs of his and there are many transcripts of seminars by Bhante on Milarepa's songs.

I am not sure whether Atisha is so familiar to anyone not closely-interested in Tibetan Buddhism. He is a very important figure in Tibetan Buddhism in that he

synthesises two lineages: that of Nāgārjuna: the Wisdom school, and that of the Yogācāra school. He went to Tibet and re-stimulated Buddhism in Tibet after the great persecutions of Buddhism there. He established the Kadam school, and one of his teachings was that he declared the three Yānas to be successive along the Path, so it is a syncretic movement like the Tien-t'ai. His teachings eventually developed into the Gelugpa school.

I shall not say anything about Padmasambhava. Tsongkhapa, along with Padmasambhava and Atisha, is one of the three greatest contributors to Tibetan Buddhism. He studied under all the great masters of all the traditions in all three Yānas. He too studied both the Nāgārjuna and Yogācāra schools, so his approach also is syncretic. Conze says of him that he was one of the greatest thinkers of the Buddhist world, and Paul Williams says he is the most sophisticated and acute Madhyamaka commentator. He was a great thinker, a great person in Buddhist history. He was also a great reformer, and, of course, Mañjughoṣa is Tsongkhapa's yidam and inspiration.

Next we move up to the Indian teachers. Vasubandhu lived in the 4th century C.E. and was one of the chief exponents of the Yogācāra school. His brother was Asaṅga, and Asaṅga converted Vasubandhu to the Yogācāra when Vasubandhu was quite old, so he started as a Theravādin. Bhante says of him that he, *"Enjoys equal prestige as an exponent of the two main branches of the Buddhist tradition. With one foot planted firmly on the side of the Great and the other on the side of the Little Vehicle, he bestrides medieval Indian Buddhism 'like a colossus'* " (*A Survey of Buddhism*, 1980, p. 360).

Then comes another great figure in Buddhist history, Śāntideva. I do not need to say anything about him. I am sure, too, that everyone has heard of Buddhaghosa, the famous commentator of the Theravādin school, who wrote the Visuddhi-magga. Bhante says of the *Visuddhi-magga* that it is a splendid survey of Buddhist doctrine, it is a compendium of the Tipiṭaka and one of the greatest masterpieces of Buddhist literature, which describes authoritatively, lucidly and in great detail the principal meditational practices of the Buddhist yoga. Again, I need not say much about Nāgārjuna. He was associated with the Prajñāpāramitā literature and the New Wisdom school. And finally there is Asaṅga, who established the Yogācāra school.

Above the sixteen Gurus of the Past are the Five Jinas, the Five Buddhas. Finally, above the Five Buddhas is Vajrasattva.

The practice then proceeds in a similar way to the Padmasambhava practice. We say: "From now onwards until the attainment of Enlightenment, with great reverence of body, speech and mind I Go for Refuge to the Buddha Śākyamuni," and we make prostrations. After we have done the prostrations, rays of light come from all the forty-three figures on the Tree and take away the defilements of our self and all sentient beings with whom we are prostrating. The rays eventually merge into the body of the Refuges, and all the figures merge into Śākyamuni, and Śākyamuni into the Void.

What is the significance of this practice for us?

Probably some of the significance of the practice has emerged just in the description of the way the practice has been created. It clearly has a huge significance. I think the introduction of this practice into our Movement is a very major step. The Movement, and particularly the Order, is founded on the principle of Going for Refuge. We emphasise again and again the centrality of Going for Refuge, and the Movement exists to help people to Go for Refuge and to deepen their Going for Refuge. In a way there is no other reason for us to exist. Hence an emphasis on Going for Refuge, or a way of helping people to intensify their Going for Refuge, is very important. The introduction of the Prostration Practice of Padmasambhava into the Ordination Process was an important step but, as I explained earlier, that particular practice seemed, after a while, to be not entirely appropriate.

Therefore we have to ask ourselves: "What kind of Movement are we?" and the answer is: "We are a Buddhist Movement." We are just that, a Buddhist Movement! We do not emphasise one particular school or movement or tradition of Buddhism over any other, but draw on all of them. Individuals may well be interested and attracted to different aspects of the Buddhist tradition, but in a general sense we are a Buddhist Movement. We do not want to be identified with one sect or school or movement or culture. We draw our inspiration from all schools of Buddhism, both scripturally and from all the great personalities of Buddhism. I came across a Kagyupa description of a Refuge Tree, which would have the Kagyu lineage above the head of Milarepa, and the lama who is introducing the practice says in the book that we can put the lineages of the other Tibetan schools into the practice in order not to be sectarian but to be ecumenical. We see, then, that that tendency exists, but although it exists within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition it has still not opened up far enough. It is the great advantage of this practice that it opens the whole process out.

Of course, some Order Members who already do the Padmasambhava Prostration practice, or for whom Padmasambhava is their practice, can continue with that, but more generally, for Mitras and Friends who ask for ordination, it is not particularly appropriate that they take up that practice. We need a Refuge Tree practice that reflects back to us what is crucial to us, to enable us to Go for Refuge more intensively and more deeply, to engage our emotions, so that we do not have to worry about whether we understand the esoteric figures down in the right-hand or left-hand corner. There is a huge amount in it, but in a way it is a very simple practice. It reminds me in some ways of something that happened many years ago at the Pundarika Centre where we had, for a while, some of Bhante's rūpas on the shrine. We had a beautiful Mañjughoṣa rupa, an Amitāyus rūpa, vajras and bells and all sorts of wonderful things, and at a certain point Bhante came and took them all away, saying: "In a Buddhist Centre where we are just teaching meditation, we need a very simple Buddhist shrine with just a Buddha on the shrine and the three traditional offerings."
Hence the simpler symbolism of Going for Refuge as expressed for us in the Refuge Tree is following the principle of 'more and more of less and less'. It is so that we really know what we are doing; we know what we are Going for Refuge to

and why we can relate to this particular Refuge Tree. Maybe it will take us a while to explore the figures, but their general meaning is clear and simple.

It is interesting that we have the Gurus of the Present on the front lotus i.e. Bhante and his teachers. This places Bhante in relation to the whole tradition. Obviously our teacher and our teacher's teachers are our doorway into the Dharma. We have not met the Buddha, so this is our immediate connection with the Buddha in terms of the esoteric refuge. However, I think it is interesting that these teachers are on the Tree now, because it does, I suppose, express a lineage. I know that Bhante has not been very keen on lineage as expressed in some other Buddhist schools in the past. A *Newsletter* many years ago featured an article called 'What's Your Lineage?' It was an answer to people who asked about Bhante: 'What's his lineage? Who is he?' as though he was some sort of upstart in the Buddhist world. Bhante has never felt a need to justify his existence in that way, but a natural interest has arisen from Order Members and people in the Movement about his teachers, particularly in relation to Dhardo Rimpoche, whom many people have met. There is a real connection, a real spiritual connection. It is not an interest in lineage from an external point of view, but a desire to know Bhante more deeply by knowing his teachers or by knowing about his teachers. Hence it seems appropriate that now we have that picture of him and his eight main teachers and we can look at that lineage. In a way, it is a picture of spiritual friendship, a picture of spiritual communication – Bhante's spiritual friends.

The other point about that picture of Bhante and his eight teachers, that lineage, is that there are teachers from different traditions. In that way there is an expression of the breadth of the Movement, the breadth of Bhante's experience. There is a Theravādin teacher, a Chinese Ch'an teacher, and Tibetan teachers from different schools or who have taken initiations from different schools. Jamyang Khyentse the Great, who is incarnated in Dilgo Khyentse and Jamyang Khyentse, founded the Rime Movement in Tibet with some of his friends. He wanted to break down the differences between the Tibetan Buddhist schools, to harmonise the lineages and to end sectarian exclusivity. He saw that the schools were caught up in regional strife and politics, and he wanted to break that down, so he and his friends went everywhere and swapped initiations so that they broke down those lineages and formed the Rime Movement, which is a very popular and powerful movement in Tibetan Buddhism today. Bhante's teachers are part of that movement, and Triratna reflects this approach of non-sectarianism and draws on all forms and all schools that are relevant for us today. There is teaching in the way those people practised their Dharma. They were all obviously great individuals, but they were all open-minded and prepared to practise Buddhism, just practise the Dharma, not to be caught up in sectarianism. There is a meeting of minds between Bhante and those people. I imagine his approach and their approach met. That is one of the things we can draw from Bhante and his teachers.

To return to the sixteen Gurus of the Past. What we are looking at when we look at this Refuge Tree is a sort of glorious spiritual family tree. These are our spiritual relations, these are the people we can connect with. They are teachers, as I have said, from all the main countries and cultures that Buddhism has been to in the East; from India in the first place and thence to Japan, China, and Tibet. Just from

these mini-descriptions of them, you can tell they are all very prominent, gifted people, very gifted teachers. They all seem to be great innovators. They either take existing material and recast it, retranslate it, reshape it from the moribund state in which they may have found it; or they have new insights, fresh ideas. They are all translators in one way or another in the fullest sense of that word – not just from one language to another, from one culture to another, but making Buddhism accessible. From India to China was a huge step. It took years of translation into an experience that people could understand. It was also translation from one level to another. We know that, for Bhante, the archetype of St. Jerome the translator is very important. In the booklet *St. Jerome Revisited* he cites as examples of the translator archetype in Buddhist history Nāgārjuna, Kumarajiva and Hsüan-Tsang. He makes it clear that it is not just a translation of the letter; it is a translation from the spirit into a new culture, or from one level to another, and from a new level of understanding into concepts that can be understood. It seems that all of them either founded schools or reshaped existing traditions. They were all great practitioners. Many of them were poets, writers, geniuses in various ways, but they were also great fund-raisers and builders. So they were all great individuals. Although we seem on the whole to be more interested in Tibetan Buddhism – and Tibetan Buddhism is wonderful – perhaps it is good for us that there are Chinese and Japanese Buddhist teachers on this Refuge Tree whose lives and works and traditions we can explore, and maybe we can bring that more to the fore in the way we practise in the Movement.

I said earlier that according to Bhante the Tibetan Refuge Tree is, "A transposition of the act of Going for Refuge into the rich and colourful mode of the Indo-Tibetan tradition." What we have here is a transposition of that Refuge Tree and that Indo-Tibetan tradition into something much more real and accessible for us today. As I said, it is our own family tree. Its ritual and mythic significance are not weakened but rather intensified and enhanced. It is simpler, so in a sense it is easier for us to relate to. Yes, it needs work, but it is easier for us to express devotion towards it if we take up the practice. Some people apparently say they miss the Padmasambhava Refuge Tree, but, as Aloka said to me, "It's not a different tree, it's the same tree, but seen from a different angle." I think this is a very good point and more in keeping with where we are.

This Tree can become our Myth. If we want to intensify our Going for Refuge there are many ways of doing so, but I think from my own experience, limited as it is as yet, that taking up the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice of the Buddha Śākyamuni in this form will be especially helpful to us. It will also plug us into the whole Buddhist tradition. More than that, this Refuge Tree, as an expression of Going for Refuge in symbolic and mythic form, is entirely in keeping with the principles of the Movement, because we need to come back again and again to the centrality of Going for Refuge. That is its significance for us. We need to follow that through in all that we do, so that we understand it all in relation to our Going for Refuge. Bhante talked about this in a meeting that a few of us had with him earlier this year – how we need to know why we do the Mindfulness of Breathing in relation to our Going for Refuge, why we work in Right Livelihood in relation to our Going for Refuge, and so on and so on. This

Refuge Tree is a mirror of the principles of the Movement expressed in symbolic form.

If we all undertook this practice individually and collectively, I am sure we would strengthen our personal practice of Going for Refuge and our collective practice of Going for Refuge, so that – to end with the verses of the practice, we would together:

"With great reverence of body, speech and mind
Go for Refuge to the Buddha Śākyamuni!"

End of Dhammadinna's talk.

Some further points about the Refuge Tree

During the course of 2008 and 2009, Sangharakshita's thinking on the Refuge Tree developed as a result of some misunderstandings of various of the figures on the Tree. The key points are as follows:

1. Having encountered various Tibetan Refuge Trees which are specific to the particular school from which they come, he thought that what we needed was an 'ecumenical' Refuge Tree. By this, he means that our Refuge Tree must represent the whole Buddhist tradition and its history. Ecumenicism, as you may remember, is one of the six distinctive features of Triratna that we encountered in the Foundation Year. However, Sangharakshita's thinking on this area has developed and he now prefers the term 'critical ecumenicism' i.e. it is not that we uncritically accept all the various teachings and practices from the different schools of Buddhism but that we sift through them in a critical manner to sort out what is of relevance to us, basing that critical evaluation on certain well-founded Dharmic principles. Those principles are primarily that we interpret later Buddhist teachings in the light of the earlier ones, particularly those teachings found in the Nikāyas (and which are substantially the teaching of the historical Buddha); and that, in the terms of one of the four great reliances found in the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa (and other sutras), we should rely on the discourses of explicit meaning rather than those of implicit meaning. Hence, where there is conflict between symbolic or metaphorical teachings and those that can be interpreted more literally, we follow the latter and use them to help us interpret the more recondite teachings. The following quote, from Sangharakshita's talk *Looking Ahead a Little Way*, gives some of his thoughts on this:

   > *"In the first place, the FWBO/TBMSG is an ecumenical movement. Ecumenical is not really the best word in this connection but there seems to be no other, at least not in English. The word signifies that in principle we accept the whole Buddhist tradition as it has developed over the centuries in the East. It means that we do not identify ourselves exclusively with any one Eastern sect or tradition. We learn from all, we appreciate all, and we are inspired by all. We*

study as you know, Pāli texts, like the Sutta Nipāta, the Dhammapada and the Udāna. We also study the great Mahayana sutras as well as works like the 'Songs of Milarepa' and the 'Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava'. At the same time we study them critically. We do not accept necessarily as gospel everything, every word that they contain. We try to understand what they are getting at. We ask ourselves what they really mean, what they are trying to convey, what they are trying to communicate. And we try to apply that meaning, to the extent that we are able to understand it, to the living of our own lives as Buddhists.

We have the same attitude towards the Buddhist tradition as a whole, that is to say, towards the Eastern sects and schools. Our attitude is one of critical appreciation. We do not necessarily accept them on their own terms and we certainly do not confuse the Dharma itself with the various national cultures in which the various Eastern Buddhist sects and schools happen to be embodied. Above all perhaps we try to see what those sects and schools have in common with each other and with ourselves. This in brief is what I mean by what I call the ecumenical attitude of the FWBO/TBMSG.

2. In response to some confusion about who are the true refuges on the Tree, Sangharakshita has recently started to refer to it as the Triratna Buddhist Order Tree of Refuge and Respect. He wants to make it clear that, in choosing the various teachers of the present and past, he is not making any particular claims as to the transcendental attainments of any of those figures i.e. they are there not as figures that we can go for refuge to (in the sense of being true refuges) but as figures that we can respect. So the true refuges on the Tree are the Buddhas of the Three Times; the Arahants; the Bodhisattva Sangha; the Dharma teachings; the Mandala of the Five Buddhas and Vajrasattva. The teachers of the past and present are not there as true refuges, the one exception to this being Padmasambhava. Sangharakshita distinguishes between the historical figure of Padmasambhava (who is a composite figure anyway i.e. as portrayed in his eight manifestations) and Padmasambhava as an archetype of Enlightenment. In the latter sense, Padmasambhava is a true refuge but not in the former sense.

3. He suggests that what is most important about the figures on the Refuge Tree is their life and example rather than their teachings as such. In connection with this, he points out that some of the teachings from the different figures are irreconcilable on their own level e.g. Buddhaghosa's emphasis on self-power and Shinran's teaching of reliance upon other power. So we can't literally attempt to practice all their teachings. He points out that the contact he had with his own teachers was more important for the inspiration and example that they gave him than for the specific sadhana practices he received.

In January of 2009, Sangharakshita gave a talk to the European Chairman's Assembly on the theme of the Refuge Tree. If you want to find out all that he said on that occasion, including his thoughts on several of the historical teachers, you can listen to the original talk on *Free Buddhist Audio* or watch on *Video Sangha*:

Audio: http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=BH18

Video: http://www.videosangha.net/video/Sangharakshita-on-the-Refuge-Tr

Another important point to mention about the Refuge Tree is that in the Indian wing of our Order, there are two further figures on the Refuge Tree. We met both of them during the first week of this module i.e.Anagarika Dharmapala and Dr. Ambedkar. They are on the Refuge Tree because of the important role they have played in the revival of Buddhism in India in the modern period. Sangharakshita considers them to be guardians of the Refuge Tree and not as refuges themselves and they are only to be visualised within the Indian wing of our Order. They are seen on two smaller lotuses to the front of the teachers of the present.

Finally, I think it is important to remember that the Refuge Tree itself is a symbol rather then a sign and its full significance will only reveal itself through engaging with it as a symbol i.e. through visualisation and the Going for Refuge and Prostration practice itself. So whilst we can engage with each of the figures in a more rational and discursive way, it is through contemplating them, reflecting upon them, and prostrating ourselves before them, that their full significance will be felt within our lives.

Suggested questions

1. What are your initial responses to the image of the Refuge Tree? Do any particular parts of the symbol strike you? If so, why do you think that is?

2. Have you done the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice on Going for Refuge retreats? If so, what has been your experience of doing it? If you haven't done it before, how do you respond to the description of the practice?

3. Dhammadinna suggests that the Refuge Tree is, "Our own family tree" – can you relate to this? If so, what does it mean to you?

4. "It is not an interest in lineage from an external point of view, but a desire to know Bhante more deeply by knowing his teachers or by knowing about his teachers." Do you think that knowing more about Bhante's teachers will help to give you a stronger sense of connection with our own tradition?

5. In what ways do you think, "This Refuge Tree, as an expression of Going for Refuge in symbolic and mythic form," is entirely in keeping with the principles of the Movement'?

Some suggestions for your project

So having introduced the theme of 'great Buddhists' and looked at the Refuge Tree, it is now over to you to come up with a presentation on a great Buddhist from the Refuge Tree that particularly inspires you. You can choose from any of the historical figures on the Refuge Tree, i.e. the Buddha; the Arahants; the teachers of the present (including Sangharakshita, Dharmapala and Ambedkar if you wish to choose them); and the teachers of the past. You could adopt the following approach (although you are welcome to take a different approach if you wish):

1. Present an overview of their life. Be aware that with some of the people on the Refuge Tree there is little biographical information so the level of detail you can go into may vary between the different individuals. If you can find any pictures or representations of them, you could bring those to show to the group. You could also read one or two excerpts from traditional sources about them if you can find relevant ones. If you have the whole evening, you could consider listening to a talk on your chosen figure, or an extract from a talk, if you have found a particularly inspiring or relevant one.

2. Using Sangharakshita's criteria for what makes a Buddhist great (and any other criteria you think appropriate), give reasons as to why you think this particular individual is 'great'. You could also say what you think their significance is within the Buddhist tradition as a whole.

3. Say what it is that you personally find inspiring about your chosen individual. You could bring out any particular points that you think you could learn from them or are relevant to your own situation and to our own particular Buddhist Movement.

4. What particular teachings, or life-examples of the teachers of the past, can we see being practised in our own life and Movement? And in what way are those things being translated into our own context? An example: Hakuin is a great koan practitioner, but we don't practice formal koan. But Bhante suggests the need for 'problems' (rather than difficulties) in 'The Bodhisattva's Dream', from the *Sutra of Golden Light* series:

   (http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=124)

   Can you think of other examples?

You may want to take a whole evening for your project and begin or end it with some meditation and perhaps a reading from your chosen individual. You could also have some discussion on what other peoples response is to them and what they might learn from them. Or you could combine with someone else in the group and present two projects in one evening. Ideally, it would be good if everyone in the group chose a different figure so that you get an introduction to a range of figures. If two or three of you do want to choose the same figure, then perhaps you can combine and present a unified project on them.

References

Kulananda's book contains not only good introductions to each of the figures (and hence a good place to start your research) but also many references to traditional and modern sources for each of the figures. So what follows is additional to that and particularly includes more recently published material and talks available on *Free Buddhist Audio*.

Aloka has also given a good overview of the significance of the Refuge Tree in a series of talks that have been transcribed and published as *The Refuge Tree as Mythic Context* (available from Padmaloka Books):

http://www.padmaloka.org.uk/resources/shop

Teachers of the present

Sangharakshita's book *Precious Teachers* gives an account of his own meetings with some of his Tibetan teachers whilst his various memoirs also recount his meetings with Jagdish Kashyap and Yogi Chen and provide a unique source of information about his own life.

Brilliant Moon – Autobiography of Dilgo Khyentse (Shambhala):

http://tinyurl.com/y8vdde4

Light of Fearless Indestructible Wisdom – Life and Legacy of HH Dudjom Rimpoche (Snow Lion):

http://www.snowlionpub.com/ToC/LIFEIN_ToC.pdf

Compassionate Action by Chatral Rimpoche (Snow Lion):

http://www.snowlionpub.com/html/product_9240.html

You can also find information about Chatral Rimpoche on the Shabkar website (http://www.shabkar.org/) which is dedicated to Buddhist vegetarianism, of which Chatral Rimpoche is a strong advocate.

The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying by Sogyal Rimpoche has some of the authors' memories of Jamyang Khyentse, Dilgo Khyentse and Dudjom Rimpoches, his three main teachers:

http://tinyurl.com/ybudd3d

Free Buddhist Audio has the following relevant talks:

My Eight Main Teachers by Sangharakshita:

http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=176

Dilgo Khyentse Rimpoche by Suvajra and Sangharakshita:

http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=175

The Message of Dhardo Rimpoche by Sangharakshita:

http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=173

Dhardo Rimpoche and the Bodhisattva Tradition by Padmavajra:

http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM567

Chetul Sangye Dorje by Vajratara and *Chatral Sangye Dorje* by Dharmavira – these refer to the same person!

Vajratara's talk: http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM784

Dharmavira's talk: http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=LOC12

Plenty of talks about Ambedkar by Sangharakshita, Subhuti, Padmavajra, etc:

http://tinyurl.com/ybbc539

Dr Ambedkar's Conversion by Maitrivir-Nagarjuna:

http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=LOC178

Teachers of the Past

Free Buddhist Audio has the following relevant talks and maybe others too – use their search facility to find further references. Please note that not all the figures have pertinent material available.

Two talks on *Milarepa* by Dhammadinna –

Songs of Milarepa – His Lineage and Mahamudra:

http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM744

Grey Rock Vajra Enclosure and Milarepa's First Meeting with Rechungpa:

http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM744

Other references to *Milarepa*: http://tinyurl.com/ykkgl5y

References to *Vasubandhu*: http://tinyurl.com/ykgdmrh

References to *Shantideva*: http://tinyurl.com/yc4pd2r

References to *Tsongkhapa*: http://tinyurl.com/ybmf87k

References to *Kukai* (text only): http://tinyurl.com/ycxrua4

References to *Chih-I*: http://tinyurl.com/ycm4ump

References to *Hakuin*: http://tinyurl.com/yldglrh

References to *Hui Neng*: http://tinyurl.com/yd29vhb

References to *Hsuan Tsang*: http://tinyurl.com/yb2jlhd

References to *Atisha*: http://tinyurl.com/yfx48db

Shinran and Kabat-Zinn for an unusual approach to Shinran by Ratnaguna:

http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM728

The Arahants

References to *Sariputta*: http://tinyurl.com/y8lmm9y

References to *Mogallana* (text only): http://tinyurl.com/yejcb7k

References to *Mahakasyapa*: http://tinyurl.com/ygmzhzo