

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Three – Teachers’ Notes by Vadanya

Module 7: Faith, Symbols and the Imagination

Introduction to the whole module

Welcome to this module on faith, symbols and the imagination. In these eight (or optionally nine) sessions there is a mix of practical exercises designed to help people connect experientially with their śraddhā, and texts *about* śraddhā, the imagination and myth, designed to give people some sort of rational framework.

Structure

The course is structured as follows:

- **Week 1 – ‘The life and qualities of the Buddha’:** discussion referring back to two texts from Year 1. Optional pūjā depending on time.
- **Week 2 – ‘Mindfulness of the Buddha and his qualities’:** session based on experiential exercises done over the preceding week. Optional pūjā depending on time.
- **Week 3 – ‘The Language of images’:** experiential exercises based on an image of Śākyamuni.
- **Week 4 – ‘Śraddhā’:** discussion of a purpose-written text.
- **Week 5 – ‘Exploring lucid faith’:** session based on experiential exercises done over the preceding week, plus pūjā with purpose-created offerings.
- **Week 6 – ‘The place of faith in the Buddhist tradition’:** discussion of purpose-written text, plus ‘śraddhā bhāvanā’ meditation.
- **Week 7 – ‘Imagination and the spiritual life’:** Discussion of purpose-written text.
- **Week 8 – ‘Imagination in practice, plus final pūjā’:** session based on experiential practices done over the preceding week, plus final pūjā.
- **Optional Week 9 – Mythic context:** Discussion of purpose-written text; this could be slotted in after Week 7, to end with Week 8 above and a final pūjā, or added on at the end.

Given that there is already much project-type work in the module, there is no reference to projects in the Student Notes. If you wish them to do projects, that is your decision.

Approach

Here are a couple of general points about dealing with this material:

1. Much of this module consists of practices for people to do in the week before the class, so they need to read the material a week in advance, and not just before the session, as some people have a tendency to do. It might be a good idea to stress this.
2. The big danger with this material is that people relate to it intellectually rather than experientially. If people start to pick logical holes, *try to bring them back to their own experience*. Perhaps you might remind them of the following from the text for this week, and particularly to the last sentence:

“You need to approach everything that will be said in this module as metaphor, as allusion to something which cannot be fully explained or worked out with the intellect. You will be approaching this material in the wrong spirit if you take it literally, if you try to turn it into a metaphysical system, or if – having done either of these things – you use the wordy intellect to look for logical inconsistencies, rather than relying on your own actual experience. In this world, experience is king, and what is important is what you feel when you do a pūjā, hear a story, or quietly contemplate the image of a Buddha or Bodhisattva – and not what you *think* you logically should experience.”

Week One – The Life and Qualities of the Buddha

For the first week we are asking people to revisit some material from the first year of the course (weeks 5 and 6 of Part 1) which you need to read as well. These deal with archetypal elements in the life of the Buddha, and with the practice of mindfulness of the Buddha, which seems a logical place to start. You might also want to refer people to the exercises for next week, so that they aren't caught out by trying to read it at the last minute. *You will need to make some arrangements for people to show the pictures of their shrines to the group* – see the suggestions for next week.

Questions for reflection, discussion and research

Question 2: Other episodes with a mythic or archetypal element include the Four Sights and the Going Forth, the episode with the mad elephant, the Angulimāla story, the 'dove-footed nymph' episode from the Udāna, the account of the Parinirvana (when the Buddha glowed with golden light, muddy streams became clear, flowers rained from the sky, gods spoke, devas crowded the world, and there was a massive earthquake), as well as many other stories of encounters with devas or visits to higher realms. To help the discussion along it would help if you could describe or bring along a reading about at least one of these, and tell the mitras what it means to you. The *Access to Insight* website is an excellent resource for finding Pāli Canon readings.

<http://www.accesstoinight.org/>

Questions 1 and 3: Obviously it would be a good idea if you thought about and wrote down your own answers to these two questions.

If these discussions do not take the whole session, it would be a good idea to conclude the first session of the module with a pūjā dedicated to Śākyamuni, with readings used in the discussion.

Week Two – Mindfulness of the Buddha and his Qualities

Exercise 1

If anybody wants to talk *about* this exercise rather than describing their experience of doing it, you might remind them of the words from last weeks text about experience as king. This is most likely to happen if folk are not engaging with the exercises and actually doing them, in which case it might be worth gently pointing out that this is a Dharma *training* course, not just an opportunity for discussion – and that training requires us to actually do the practices.

Exercise 2

Most people will have access to a digital camera, so the easiest way to show everybody's shrines to the group might be to ask for a volunteer to have the

pictures emailed to them, and to get them to bring their laptop to the class to display the images.

If time allows...

If you've got any time left over the obvious thing is to do a pūjā, perhaps with a reading illustrating some quality of the Buddha that is important to you.

Before next week

Next week we will be using an image of Śākyamuni painted by Aloka to explore the nature of Enlightenment further, this time through the language of images. Folk can download a digital version of this to print out, but it might be a good idea this week to check that everyone has the equipment and knowledge to do this. Also if anyone has access to a printer that prints larger than A4 it would be good to get them to produce a large copy for use in next week's class, and perhaps even for the individual members of the mitra group.

Week Three – The Language of Images

Exercise 1

1. Let each member of the group report in about what the image conveys to them, drawing out common threads if possible.
2. Having done this, let the mitras look at the picture for a while again, and when they have done so, guide them through the following questions, which are designed to help them explore the image in some detail. (Some of these questions will no doubt have been touched upon already, but this exercise will probably bring things together.)

As you go through these questions, be sure to give people plenty of time to come up with their own responses. The suggestions in square brackets summarise what people usually come up with, along with some of my own comments. You can use them to clarify and summarise if they seem useful to you, after people have had time to explore for themselves. You can also throw them in as suggestions if you want to, if people seem a bit stuck.

Here are the questions I suggest:

1. *What do you notice about the bottom part of the painting? The grass? The hands?*

This part of the image conveys a very grounded, 'earthy' impression. The Buddha seems very connected to the earth and nature, as though he was emerging from them, and grounded in them. The hands are like workman's hands, and very down-to-earth.

2. *What impression does the area around the Buddha's head convey?*
In contrast, this communicates a 'cosmic' sense of something like outer space, as though the Buddha's awareness includes the stars and galaxies.

3. *What does the Buddha's face convey?*

Serenity, among other things.

4. *What does the fact that the background is a patchwork of areas of light convey? Note that in its actual setting the golden areas often shine almost like stained glass from the light from the window behind the shrine.*

In contrast, a sense of vibrancy, or energy.

5. *What do the edges of the figure, and the way it relates to the background convey?*

The figure seems to merge with the background, as though it was not entirely separate from what is around it; this conveys a sense that the Buddha is part of everything, a sense of connectedness.

6. *What does the fact that the Buddha's head is surrounded by a distinct aura convey?*

The aura conveys a sense that the Buddha inhabits his own world, the world of his higher mental states, and is insulated from the effects of the world around him; he is very much separate from conditioned things, as well as being part of them.

7. *What do the presence of the sun and moon convey?*

These are traditionally interpreted as symbolizing the union of wisdom and compassion, or male and female. In relation to the latter point, the Buddha transcends gender, he no longer identifies with any limited way of being human. Also the sun and moon could refer to day and night, symbolizing the passage of time. The fact that they are both in the sky at the same time symbolizes that the Buddha is somehow outside time.

8. *What does the white spot between the Buddha's eyebrows say to you?*

Śūnyatā? The fact that the Buddha has within him a gateway to a different dimension?

9. **Final question:** *How many different pairs of opposites does the painting suggest that the Buddha unites?*

Grounded but 'cosmic', serene but vibrant with energy, part of everything but transcending everything, male and female, day and night. There may be more.

Week Four – Śraddhā

Most of the questions speak for themselves. Where appropriate I have put suggestions for expanding on them in square brackets below.

1. Before you came into contact with the Dharma, what did you connect with the word ‘faith’? Did you see it as something positive or negative? What conditioned your reaction?
2. Do you remember any experience of ‘confident faith’ when you first came across the teachings of the Dharma? Can you describe what this felt like? Have you forgotten it?
3. Think of a Buddhist teaching that you are confident is true. Be ready to tell the group why you have this sense of certainty.
4. What quality of the Enlightened Mind do you particularly admire and resonate with at the moment – serenity, mettā, compassion, generosity, integrity, energy, courage, creativity, freedom, wisdom, or whatever? Are there any figures in the Buddhist tradition which particularly embody this quality for you?
5. *What do you long for – if all practical constraints were removed, how would you most like to live? Can you relate your longing to some aspect of the goal of the spiritual life?*

You could perhaps help people with this last part of the question. For example, it may be that someone’s ideal life is unrealistic and unachievable in practice, but represents a desire for something that can be approached through the spiritual life. Often people’s dreams of the ideal life represent a desire for:

- Friendship and a sense of community – e.g. living communally.
And/or
- A desire for simplicity – the back to nature, self-sufficiency idyll.
And/or
- A desire for beauty – again living more closely with nature.
And/or
- A desire for freedom – e.g. being nomadic or running away to sea.

If we can help them to identify what they are really longing for we can help them to find realistic way of getting more of the quality they desire.

6. *Do you see the goal as something sublime and mysterious, or do you tend to bring Enlightenment down to where you are now? What are the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches?*

If we see it as too distant we will have no confidence that we can ever reach it. If we make it too mundane it loses any real spiritual power, and we will lack a sense of reverence for anything beyond us.

7. *How does your śraddhā make your life different from that of a non-Buddhist?*
8. *Do you think the three aspects of faith discussed in the text are completely separate? How are they connected?*

Obvious really, e.g. if we don't have confident faith we can't have the confident aspect of longing faith. If we don't have a heartfelt connection with the ideal we will not feel longing for it etc.

9. *Which aspect of faith are you strongest in? Which do you find most difficult?*

At the end it would be a good idea to draw peoples' attention to what they need to do for next week – see the next section, and read the notes for the mitras about Week 5.

You could briefly discuss the sort of figures people might want to choose for the exercise for next week – the exercise is most suited to exploring archetypal figures, and you might try to guide people towards this, but some people who do not relate to these may want to choose a historical figure. Obviously you need to use your own judgement about that according to the person and the circumstances.

You may also need to set some time limits for people's presentations, according to the number in the group, to allow time for a sevenfold pūjā, plus any offerings that will take time, such as poems, songs or music.

Week Five – Exploring Lucid Faith

As you will see from the notes for the mitras, this week starts with people making presentations about a figure that means something to them, and their experience of exploring it over the past week. This is followed by a sevenfold pūjā, in which folk can make offerings they have created. In case any of the offerings take the form of poems, music, or anything else that takes time, you need to find out what they are at the beginning of the session, and decide how they can be fitted in. Some will best be done as part of people's presentation, others can be fitted into the pūjā.

Week Six – The Place of Faith in the Buddhist Tradition

To balance what might otherwise be a rather wordy evening, this session is split between a discussion of the questions for reflection, and a meditative exercise built around the three aspects of faith introduced earlier – a sort of ‘*śraddhā bhāvanā*’, which I believe was devised by Subhuti, and used successfully with Order members both in India and the UK. Given our topic, and the need to ground peoples understanding of the three aspects of faith in experience, there seems no real reason not to introduce this to mitras doing this module, as long as it is made clear that this is more or less a one-off, and should not be done regularly at the expense of the more basic practices.

Because mitras with no *sādhana* practice may find this practice more difficult than Order members, I suggest that it needs to be fairly heavily led, with regular input to bring people back if they have lost the thread. Instructions for the practice are given in the notes for mitras, but you will need to do the leading in your own way. It would help if you get some experience of doing the practice yourself, and, if you are not very experienced at doing this sort of thing, write a bit of a loose script for yourself.

You will probably want to do the meditation at the beginning of the evening, and get folk to report in briefly on their experience, before moving on to discuss the questions. Otherwise the discussion is likely to expand to fill the whole evening.

Week Seven – Imagination and the Spiritual Life

This is not an easy text for some people. Even people who are happy with the sort of practical exercises we have been doing in this module, and who have a positive experience of using the imagination in the spiritual life, can begin to engage their critical rational mind in an inappropriate and unhelpful way when they start thinking about the imagination rather than using it. If this starts happening, it could be helpful to bring people back to their experience, and out of the realm of logic-chopping. You could perhaps remind them of the words at the beginning of this module, which are quoted again in the text for this session:

“You need to approach everything that will be said in this module as metaphor, as allusion to something which cannot be fully explained or worked out with the intellect. You will be approaching this material in the wrong spirit if you take it literally, if you try to turn it into a metaphysical system, or if – having done either of these things – you use the wordy intellect to look for logical inconsistencies, rather than relying on your own actual experience.”

But even having said this, people can find it difficult to rise above literalism. When we talk about higher planes of being and objects existing outside time, for example, some people only seem to be able to relate to this literally, rather than as poetic truth or metaphor – so, they think, it must either be a fiction, or else factually true. The idea of poetic truth and metaphor, which is not factually true

but which nonetheless expresses an aspect of a deeper reality more accurately than any factual truth, is a difficult one for some people to grasp.

Another possible problem is with the very idea of the imagination as a valid way of knowing spiritual truths. Many people seem to be highly conditioned to think of the imagination as mere make-believe, and cannot get their head round this idea. The connection between what they think of as the imagination and what Coleridge meant by the word, or what Sangharakshita means by the imaginal faculty, is therefore difficult for them to see. One way into this is perhaps to explain that we would normally call the faculty that a poet like Coleridge uses to create his poems by the name of imagination. Coleridge was explaining how this faculty operates in his experience, as a gifted poet – the fact that this doesn't bear much resemblance to our usual idea of how the imagination works reveals how poor *our* ideas of the imagination are, rather than detracting from Coleridge's description. You will probably also have your own ideas.

In the end we probably have to accept that for some people this whole area will seem incomprehensible, at least for the time being, because it is too foreign to their conditioning. But by hearing these ideas in different ways again and again such folk often start to loosen some of their preconceptions over the course of their involvement with Triratna, and this session may be part of this process – and therefore not wasted.

The questions for discussion all relate to people's own experience so do not need any comments.

Week Eight – Imagination in Practice and a Final Pūjā

End the module with discussion of the exercises for this week, and a final sevenfold pūjā. I hope you enjoyed leading it.

Optional Extra Week

The module includes an optional extra week on 'Mythic Context', which many mitras have said they found very useful. If you want to you could add this before Week 8 – so as to end with a puja – or slot it in at the very end. It has been suggested that this text is more suited to men than women, because one of the things it deals with is the hero myth (actually more the way it deals with the hero myth – Saccanama). Personally I am not sure I agree – the hero myth is not about being a macho John Wayne figure, it is about overcoming the obstacles to developing our full potential as mature human beings, and there are plenty of examples of the hero myth in which the hero is female. If you are leading a women's group, read it and judge for yourself.

Here it is – if you want to use it you will have to distribute it to the mitras yourself, as it isn't included in their notes on the web.

What is myth?

The word 'myth' has many meanings for different people. For some it means something that is simply not true. For others it means a story about the gods and goddesses of an ancient culture, which has probably lost its meaning for us, because we have lost our connection with the energies these gods represent under the influence of Christianity and rationalism. But for many people in the areas of spirituality and psychology, the word myth is used to mean a story (in the loosest sense) which gives meaning to human life and action. It is probably not possible to give a watertight definition for the word myth used in this sense, and we probably get at its meaning best by looking at some different aspects of what we mean by myth.

One aspect is that myth is a story we use to explain some aspect of the world and our place in it, and which therefore guides our action and gives meaning to our lives. Another aspect is that the most powerful myths have their roots in the archetypal realm, and carry a deep archetypal meaning. Myth in this sense means a story, or a pattern of action, which, because its source lies in the very depths of our collective psyche, can give a powerful sense of motivation and deep meaning to our lives when it is acted out. In this sense we could say that a myth is an archetype in action, describing aspects of the way we live and act when we are expressing an archetype, or allowing one to act through us.

We all have a myth

At the simplest level, we can see a myth as a story which explains the universe and our role in it. Seeing it in this way, we all have our own myths, and we all live by them. We all tell a story about the universe and our place in it, which gives meaning to the way we live, and which strongly influences our actions. Even if we think that we live in a meaningless, random, indifferent universe, this is a story we are telling that guides our actions and provides the meaning behind them. This is a myth. Within this myth we might act out one of several roles. We might act the role of the Hedonist, thinking that the only sensible thing to do in such a world is to eat, drink and be merry. We might act the Existentialist Hero, defiantly asserting our free will in the face of a universe that doesn't care. Or, more likely, we act the role of the Escapist, trying to create a cocoon of temporary security, routine, comforting relationships, constant entertainment, and small pleasures, to distract ourselves from the awfulness of our imagined view of the world. Those who live out this Escapist role within the myth of the random, indifferent universe are largely not aware that they are living a myth. To them, this is just 'normal' life, because so many others share their myth, and because they never question the worldview behind it. But to those in past ages or other cultures who lived or live by a different myth, such as that of the Warrior, Monk, or Magician, this would seem a very strange and degrading way to live one's life.

Those who live by the myth of the random, meaningless universe normally think that the story they are telling is simply the stark truth about the way things are, based on what they have been told about the nature of the world as revealed by 'science'. But of course, not being Enlightened, we do not know the way things

are. And the ‘science’ we invoke is simply a successful approach to predicting how the material world will behave; it in no way proves that we live in a meaningless, indifferent universe. This is just the story that many people in scientific and academic circles currently choose to tell themselves - although the greatest among them seldom do so.

Some myths are better than others

The plain fact is that we do not know ‘the way things are’, and no one explanation of it in words can encompass it. So we all tell a story about the universe and our place in it that guides the way we live. Some of these stories express only a shallow aspect of the truth, and will lead to a shallow, unfulfilling life, and to karmic acts that will turn us into shallow, unhappy beings. Other stories – the ones that express more of the deep meaning behind things – will, if we live them fully, lead to a life of depth and meaning, a life that will be satisfying and deeply fulfilling even when we are in the midst of pain and difficulty. They will lead to a life in which we become deep beings.

A myth of this sort is not just a funny story about gods and goddesses, or an attempt at a factual explanation of something in the material world by people who did not have the benefit of our scientific knowledge. A myth of this sort is a story that communicates some aspect of the deep meaning of things, in a way that speaks to our depths, and so stirs up our deep energies, motivating us to live out this aspect of the truth in our daily life.

The danger of literalism

So some myths are better than others, because they express more of reality, and lead to more fulfilling lives and better karmic consequences. But no one myth sums up the whole truth, and no one myth has a monopoly on the truth. If we take any myth as the literal truth, or the only truth, it is likely to turn negative. For example the myth of a creator God which forms the basis of Christianity, Judaism and Islam may lead some people to more ethical, less self-indulgent, and more other-regarding; but if this myth is taken as the literal truth, and the only truth, it can lead to crusades, inquisitions, jihadist terrorism, and intolerant fundamentalism. One of the main problems with the theistic religions is that they confuse mythic truth with factual truth, failing to see that there is a difference between them, and failing to see that myth can be ‘true’ in a deeper sense, and that it can be lived out in a highly positive way, without the need to see it as factually true. This is the sin of literalism, which is the besetting sin of the Western theistic religions, and which is often still a strong tendency in Westerners who have rejected these traditions.

A middle way

We need to find a middle way. We should not take a literalistic attitude to the myths we live by; yet at the same time we need to engage as fully as we can with a myth that gives deep meaning to our lives. Engaging with a myth that works for us and connects us with the depths of reality, a myth that genuinely speaks to our

depths and awakens our deep energies, so that we act out its truth in our daily lives, is the key to spiritual progress. Unless we do this we will almost certainly live out one of the myths we have adopted unconsciously. In all likelihood we will live the myth of Escapist within a meaningless universe, creating a temporary cocoon to distract ourselves from the emptiness of our view of life. And no matter how much we agree rationally with the truths of the Dharma, no matter how often we go to the Buddhist centre or on retreat, no matter how much we meditate, we will make little spiritual progress while we are still living that myth.

So we need a middle way between literalism on the one hand, and lack of engagement with creative myth on the other; but for most of us the more urgent need is to free ourselves from the disempowering myth we have been conditioned to accept as 'normal', by using our imagination to engage strongly with a myth that releases our deep energies. This is a creative act, an act of the imagination in the most positive sense. To enable us to do this we may need to put our critical intellect on hold for a time, as we do whenever we engage in a creative act. For example when we go to a play or film we temporarily ignore the fact that what we see is not 'real', and that the people in front of us are actors, in order to engage imaginatively in a way that touches our depths. We need to do something similar to engage imaginatively with a creative myth.

Public myths and private myths

The most powerful myths – those that have most power to motivate us and shape our lives – are public, in the sense that they are shared by a number of people. Because the myth is public it can be widely expressed in art, music and literature, as well as in shared ritual. It can form the basis of a culture or subculture. All this has the effect of reinforcing and heightening the power of the myth, and creates a strong sense of community and shared values among those who engage with the myth. Within such a public myth there can be a large number of personal myths, which draw extra power by being supported by the shared public myth. By contrast myths which are purely personal, and which exist only in the privacy of the mind of the individual, rather than being part of a shared public reality, are less richly expressed and have less power to motivate us and guide our lives.

For many centuries Christianity was the main shared public myth in Europe and its cultural offshoots. Within this public myth many people lived out their own personal myths, tapping in to the power of archetypes such as those of the warrior, monk, hermit, king, or magician. Because of the drawbacks in the monotheistic myth, and because the myth was taken literally, the results were not always positive. But nevertheless large numbers of people in all sorts of roles in society had their lives enriched by a deep sense of meaning, and found ways to act out some of their highest impulses and aspirations, even in quite humdrum roles – so that even businessmen, tradesmen and servants could feel that by performing their daily tasks in a spirit of uprightness and service they were contributing to a much larger purpose.

Today the Christian myth is largely dead, at least in Britain, and the public myths that have replaced it do not have the same power or archetypal content, possibly

with the single exception of the myth of romantic love. (Unfortunately this myth, while it is almost inevitable that very young people will fall under its spell, does not provide a positive context for grown adults, and tends to reduce us to the level of adolescents.) Today our personal myths, even when they are positive, usually do not have the support of a meaningful public myth, and so tend to lack the power to motivate us to live them out courageously and wholeheartedly. Part of our task as Buddhists is to create and engage with a new public myth which expresses the wisdom of the Dharma, and within which we can find our own diverse private myths.

The public myth of Triratna – the Bodhisattva

The central public myth of our new Western school of Buddhism is that of the Bodhisattva activity of the Triratna Buddhist Order and Triratna Buddhist Community. This is a development of the wider myth of the Bodhisattva, which underlies just about every school of Buddhism in some form or other, with only a few exceptions.

This Bodhisattva Ideal that underlies so much of Buddhism is of course a myth. The idea that the Bodhisattva postpones their Enlightenment for eons to help all beings to achieve liberation is logically inconsistent. If everybody did this nobody would ever become Enlightened – we would all be waiting at the door of Enlightenment, saying, “After you,” in a classic Buddhist standoff. But if we think this in any way undermines the Bodhisattva Ideal, we have missed the point, and lapsed into literalism. This idea of indefinitely postponing our Enlightenment for the sake of others is not meant to be taken literally. It expresses a poetic or mythic truth, pointing to the fact that as long as we are thinking in terms of *my* Enlightenment, *my* Insight, or indeed thinking about ourselves as separate beings at all, we are on the wrong track; whereas when we stop thinking in these terms and begin thinking more of others we are at least part way to the goal. Similarly the idea that the Bodhisattva vows to liberate all beings does not make logical sense – no individual could ever hope to do this. But this idea is again not meant to be taken literally. It points us toward a mythic vision in which we see ourselves as part of a general evolution of consciousness, involving all beings and the whole world. It expresses the self-transcending wish expressed by Śāntideva – “May the universe attain Buddhahood in a single divine body.”

Sangharakshita has developed this Bodhisattva myth in ways that lessen some of its dangers, especially for Westerners, with our strong tendency to literalism. (The Bodhisattva ideal, like any myth, can have a negative side if it is taken too literally.) Sangharakshita does not encourage us to aspire to be individual Bodhisattvas in our own right, with all the attendant dangers of spiritual inflation or masochistic martyrdom that this involves. Instead he encourages us to see ourselves as opening up to a much larger, transpersonal current of positive volition in the universe, the Bodhicitta, which has expressed itself through our Movement to create what we have now, and will continue to express itself through us to the extent that we align with it. We could call this the myth of the Bodhisattva activity of Triratna, which is expressed symbolically by the image of the Order as the Thousand Armed Avalokiteśvara.

In this image each arm of the Bodhisattva is an independent individual, but all respond in their different ways to the positive stream of volition represented by the Bodhisattva, so that together they are a powerful positive force in the world. Although this symbol usually refers to the Order, there is no reason why mitras should not see themselves in the same way, although it is Order members who have made the most explicit commitment to living out this vision. Within this myth of the Bodhisattva activity of our movement, individuals can and do live out a wide range of different personal myths, according to their individual temperament, talents, and stage of development. Some might be deeply influenced by the archetype of the homeless renunciant – a number of Order members have acted this out by living in simple sheds, for example in the gardens of Buddhist centres, by spending periods with no fixed home at all, and even by living on the streets. Others will respond to the less extreme archetype of the monk or nun, which has a powerful attraction for some people. Others may act out the myth of the hermit or artist. Others will see themselves in a wide variety of roles, using their particular talents as arms of Avalokitesvara, contributing to the common project in their diverse ways, whether as Dharma teachers, Centre workers, workers in a Buddhist business, scholars, fundraisers, doctors, teachers, social workers or parents. Within the wider public myth of the Bodhisattva activity of Triratna all of these diverse roles and many more can take on a mythic element of their own, which gives them a new dimension of meaning.

Sometimes these personal myths may be very specific to the individual, but there are also some other myths of the spiritual life that resonate more widely with those involved with Triratna, and which can be combined with the myth of the Bodhisattva. We will explore a few of these in the rest of this text.

The hero myth

One of the most well known myths of all, because it comes in so many forms and has been so widely written about, is the myth of the hero. Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* has described how this myth crops up across the whole range of human cultures, and provides the basis for a vast range of different stories in very different societies. According to Campbell the hero myth explains how human beings grow to their mature adult stature and develop their character, faculties, and resources. Because the hero myth relates to the way we develop as individuals, it can be a personal myth that fits very well into the wider public myth of the Bodhisattva activity of Triratna, particularly perhaps for those who are engaged in the ordination process.

Although there is of course some variation within the large number of stories based on the hero myth, according to Joseph Campbell a typical hero myth will include many of the following elements.

‘The Call’

The main character of a hero myth is often a rather ordinary, unimpressive person at the start of the story, who gets little respect from those around him. He or she is usually living a comfortable, unchallenging life, although at some level he is

dissatisfied with this, and longs for something better. The story starts when this unlikely hero receives what has been called ‘The Call’ – a challenge or invitation to take part in some endeavour that will disrupt their comfortable life, but will open up the possibility of adventure and new horizons. Sometimes this call involves the fact that the world or society is threatened, and the unlikely hero of the myth is the person best placed to deal with this, despite their apparent weakness and faults. Sometimes the call is a personal threat, or an opportunity.

The call involves some form of task, perhaps to find something, to prevent some disaster, to make a personal fortune, to save someone, or to pursue a personal destiny. The hero may be called to get rid of the ring of power that threatens the world, to find the Holy Grail, to prove himself as a Knight and be accepted as a member of the Round Table, to steal the dragon’s hoard of treasure – the variations are almost endless. Whatever the nature of the call, often the hero is very ambivalent about it. He may be attracted and excited by the prospect of a change, but at the same time he doesn’t want to leave his life of safety and comfort. The potential hero is tempted to refuse the call, and he can do this – in which case he lapses back into a life of mediocrity, and we never hear about him. But in the stories we do hear about, this is because the hero accepts the call, however reluctantly, and embarks on their life-changing adventure.

Challenges and obstacles

To pursue his goal the hero has to face some frightening dangers and obstacles. Often there are terrible forces opposed to his quest, awesome enemies he must face, or terrifying challenges he must overcome. Often these challenges and obstacles seem completely overwhelming and impossible to the hero as he starts out – he has never had to face anything like this before in his limited and comfortable life, so that he feels hopeless, and cannot see how he can possibly succeed.

Helpers

Luckily the hero does not have to do it all alone, and his commitment to a heroic quest attracts the help of forces beyond his previous limited personality. He may have a powerful wizard or warrior as a guide, animals may tell him secrets about how to overcome his adversaries, or superior beings may appear to him in dreams and encourage him. Often as the hero’s quest progresses he gets less and less of this sort of help as he acquires some of the strength and wisdom he sees exemplified in his helpers, so that towards the end of his adventure he has to face his final challenges alone.

The goal

The literal goal of the hero’s quest may take all sorts of forms, as we have already seen; but in a sense it does not matter – the real goal is the hero’s own full adult maturity, strength of character, and wisdom. Often the hero’s quest will in some way change the world if he succeeds, which symbolizes that the hero’s own inner world will change forever, and become a brighter, richer, safer, more harmonious

place, where the terrible threats from the negative forces in his own psyche have been overcome. Often the literal goal of the quest symbolizes this clearly, so that the Holy Grail that will create a harmonious kingdom, or the treasure that will bring riches and esteem, in fact symbolize internal changes in the hero himself, which will make him a being of inner richness, worthy of honour.

The return

Once he has overcome his challenges and achieved his goal the hero typically returns to his old environment, and perhaps even his old life, but as a much larger and more mature personality, capable of making a valuable contribution to the world, and perhaps of transforming it or saving it from disaster. This culmination of the hero myth is expressed, for example, in the Japanese Ox-herding verses that symbolize different stages of the spiritual life, as, “Returning to the marketplace with bliss-bestowing hands.” Once he has reached his full stature and richness of being the hero can return to the ‘marketplace’ of ordinary life, but instead of being trapped and oppressed by it he transforms it, as his presence enriches the world of those around him, and his positive states of mind radiate out to others.

The hero myth and the ordination process

The ordination process can obviously be seen as a working out of the hero myth: the call to become a member of the Order will disrupt our old life, it will involve challenges and obstacles that we would rather not face, it may attract help and advice from people wiser or more experienced than ourselves, and it will bring about personal growth and the development of new personal resources. Once ordained we can return to our original environment, but as a larger being, capable of enriching the world we live in, and enlarging the lives of those around us. The particular variant on the hero myth that is maybe most aligned with the ordination process is that in which the hero needs to prove himself to enter some form of noble order devoted to a higher purpose – the best known examples involve chivalrous orders of knights, such as King Arthur’s Round Table, but there are many other examples in myth and story. Seeing the ordination process with at least some element of this mythic perspective can bring out its real meaning in a way that a more strictly rational approach cannot do. It puts the challenges and setbacks in a proper perspective, as essential elements in a process that must not be too easy if it is to have any meaning, and so prevents us getting resentful or dispirited by them. It also gives a deeper, archetypal meaning to the goal, which we need in order to see the deeper significance of becoming a member of the Order.

The Myth of the Return Journey, and the ‘stranger in a strange land’

In his book *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment*, Sangharakshita points out that the parable in the White Lotus Sutra which tells of a rich man’s son who is separated from his father, forgets who he really is, and falls into a coarse way of life, is one version of a family of myths which crop up in one form or another in just about every spiritual tradition, because they point to something universal and important about the human condition and the spiritual life. Sangharakshita points

out that the common thread in these stories is that the main character is alienated from who and what he really is in his deepest being – what Sangharakshita calls his ‘higher self’ - and has sunk to a lower level of being. His task is to remember who he really is and what his life is about, and to make the ‘return journey’ to the being that he really is in his deepest nature.

Many stories in this family of myths could also be called ‘a stranger in a strange land’, because they involve someone who is displaced from their real home. In these stories the main character is from another, better place – a higher realm, a more advanced civilization, a royal court, a different dimension, another planet, or an ideal and paradise-like society, where the norm is for beings to behave in a comely and noble way that expresses an inner beauty, in harmony with spiritual principles. For some reason the hero travels to a lower realm, usually to perform some task. This may be to raise the level of the beings in this lower realm, to bring them some of the benefits of his homeland, or to find something valuable that is needed in his real home. But while he is in this lower realm he becomes befuddled or loses his memory – he may be drugged, injured, or enchanted, or the poisonous atmosphere of the lower realm may rob him of his connection with higher values. He completely forgets his task, and starts behaving in the relatively lowly way that is the norm in the society he inhabits at the moment, becoming just like everybody else, and thinking that this is perfectly normal, because he cannot remember anything else. However he usually has an underlying sense of unease and longing – deep in his being he knows that he should be doing something different, and that he is not being true to himself. Somehow he always feels like an alien in this lower realm – a stranger in a strange land. Luckily something usually happens to give him a glimmer of a recollection of who he really is. Perhaps some disaster happens that wakes him up. Perhaps someone from his home is sent to rescue him, and although he gets resentful and angry at this person’s attempts to shake him out of habits that have become second nature to him, eventually the messenger from a higher place manages to give him a glimpse of who he really is. Or perhaps the drug or the enchantment simply starts to wear off after many years of wasted time, so that the hero’s real identity and his real mission starts to glimmer through the mists of his befuddled mind.

Many people with a spiritual dimension to their lives resonate with these myths of the return journey, and perhaps especially with those of the stranger in a strange land. Perhaps we feel like aliens in the society we live in. Perhaps we have a sense that when we are living so-called normal lives we are not being true to ourselves. Perhaps we have a sense that we have a higher task that we have forgotten. Perhaps we feel alienated from our higher selves, and feel a longing for what we could mythically express as our true homeland. If this myth speaks to you in this way you may want to find ways of deepening and expressing it in your spiritual life, and of dovetailing it with the wider public myth of the Bodhisattva activity of Triratna.

If we resonate with it, this myth of the stranger in a strange land can add another dimension to our vision of our joint project of building Sangha. Speaking mythically, many of us are aliens in this world who have forgotten our true purpose in being here. We need to stick together to keep the awareness of our real

nature alive in each other – without each other, we will forget who we are, and be lost. We need to come together and create situations in which we act from the higher values we remember from our true home, so that we build a colony of that higher realm in the midst of a society in which these values seem foreign and alien. We need to recognize that there are many more of us out there who are lost and sinking for lack of connection with their own kind, and make every effort to attract them to us, as this will save their lives – sometimes quite literally.

Three myths of the spiritual life

In an article in issue 10 of the magazine *Madyamavani*, Subhuti described what he called three myths of the spiritual life, the myth of self development, the myth of self-surrender, and the myth of self unfolding. The myth of self-development sees the spiritual life as a self-powered process of development that works is a gradual way by using the law of karma. The myth of self-surrender sees the spiritual life as a process of giving up our ego to a higher power, so that we, as it were, get ourselves out of the way, and allow something higher and more universal to manifest through us. This myth of self-unfolding sees our task in the spiritual life as being to allow our own innate Buddha-nature to unfold, rather than to create anything which is not already there.

<http://madyamavani.fwbo.org/10/threemyths.html>

It is important to recognize that these three approaches to the spiritual life *are* myths – they are stories which we tell which simplify the complexity of a process that may be beyond our comprehension, but which also give a strong sense of meaning and emotional connection to what we are doing. They can fire our imagination and motivate us to practice in a way that no amount of intellectual understanding can do. But like all myths they should not be taken literally, or seen as the whole truth. And like all myths, when they are adhered to with naïve literalism they can have negative consequences.

Sangharakshita has encouraged us to see our spiritual development at first mainly in terms of the first of these three myths, the myth of self-development, and to bring in strong elements of the second – self-surrender – as we become more experienced. Although he has himself sometimes presented the Dharma in terms of the third myth, the myth of self unfolding, he now feels that this has too many dangers for westerners until we are quite far advanced on the spiritual life.

But many people in the West have a strong imaginative response to this myth of our innate Buddha nature. Many people have a sense of having a ‘higher self’ – and indeed Sangharakshita has sometimes spoken in these terms himself, although he is always careful to warn us not to take this idea literally. The idea that our task is to learn to listen more and more to this ‘higher self’, and to respond to its promptings, is a highly optimistic way of seeing the spiritual life, and often seems to express the reality of what is going on – or at least how it feels to us. When we have built up a good head of steam, for example in the midst of a retreat, meditation becomes effortless, so that it feels as though we are allowing what is already there to express itself.

If this myth of our innate Buddha nature fires our imagination, we need to find a middle way between on the one hand ignoring the impetus to our practice that such a mythic vision can give us, and on the other hand taking the myth as the literal and only truth. There is no reason why we cannot be inspired by the Buddha nature myth, and bring a necessary element of receptivity into our meditation practice when this is appropriate. At the same time we need to be very wary of the sort of fundamentalism that arises when this myth is naively seen as the only truth – as has sometimes happened, even in Triratna. This fundamentalism is both destructive to people's spiritual lives, because it ignores other approaches to practice that are essential to our progress, and divisive and destructive of Sangha, because it denigrates those who see practice through the lens of a different myth. Symptoms of this sort of fundamentalist approach to the Buddha nature myth include: claiming that it is the only right approach to meditation practice, and that all others are somehow wrong or of lesser worth; underplaying the value of so called bhāvanā practices such as the mettā bhāvanā, which have their roots more in the self-development myth; denying the place of ethics in the spiritual life; and ignoring the law of karma and the way it allows us to develop spiritual qualities through a gradual process of growth.

Conclusion

Of course the Buddha-nature myth is not the only myth that can turn negative if it is approached in a literalistic way. Any myth can do this. Even some of the central myths of Buddhism have at times been turned into dogma, and become rigid and constricting, and the tradition has needed to break through them and start afresh with a new mythic vision. But for most of us, living as we do in an age that has largely lost its ability to connect with any constructive myth, this is not usually the main danger. The main danger for most of us is that we do not engage with any constructive myth at all, and that our life remains shallow and colourless. Because of this, one of our important tasks as spiritual practitioners is to come together to create a mythic context that connects our shared lives with a source of deep archetypal meaning, and to find our own individual myths within this overall mythic context.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. How do you explain the universe and your place in it? Do you see this as a myth, or as the reality of the way things are?
2. Do you agree that some myths are better than others? Think of some myths that could have negative consequences if lived out.
3. When it comes to the way you engage with myth, do you tend more towards literalism or rationalistic scepticism – or both?
4. Do you resonate with the myth of the Bodhisattva activity of the Triratna Buddhist Order/Triratna Buddhist Community, and the image of the thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara? What effect has this myth had on your

- life – both in terms of what you have received from others and what you have contributed to others?
5. What are the dangers of the Bodhisattva myth? What are its advantages over other approaches to the spiritual life?
 6. Can you think of a story (book, film, play, fairy tale, or whatever) that has some or all of the elements of the Hero Myth? If so, tell the group about it.
 7. If you have asked for ordination, can you relate your process to the hero myth? What form did ‘call’ take. What challenges and obstacles do you face? Who or what are your helpers? What contribution do you see yourself making after your ‘return’? And so on. If you have not asked for ordination, can you apply the myth to your spiritual life in general?
 8. Do you ever feel like a stranger in a strange land? Can you see ways to allow this myth to feed into your practice?
 9. Does the myth of Buddha-nature stir your imagination? If so, how might you use it to motivate your practice without falling into literalism?
 10. Are there any myths apart from those mentioned in the text that have power for you?

Feedback on the Dharma Training Course

Once you’ve finished the module, please consider leaving feedback on the DTC on-line forum - a dedicated place for mitra group leaders to make comments, suggestions, and corrections to the new mitra course. This will have two big benefits:

- 1) It collects ideas and information needed to improve the course over time
- 2) It will also be a place where group leaders can find out how others have led or approached a particular module, share good ideas, and so on.

Each group leader needs to get their own username and password to access the forum. If you are a mitra group leader and would like to participate, please e-mail Vajrashura (who has kindly set up the forum) he’ll set up an account for you, usually within a day or two. His e-mail is: vajrashura@gmail.com, and the URL of the forum is www.dublinbuddhistcentre.org/DTCforum.