

Amitabha *by Saddhaloka*

Audio available at: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=OM366>

Talk given at Padmaloka Retreat Centre, winter retreat, 1997

Stepping off the Wheel of Life and travelling through the five-Buddha mandala to meet Amitabha in the west

We started off last week with an introduction from Manjuvajra, where we began by looking at the Wheel of Life. We saw ourselves spinning around the Wheel of Life, carried round and round by our inveterate propensities, by all those deeply ingrained habits that we hardly notice, but which make up the bundle that we call “ourselves.” We saw how, through awareness, we can begin to open up a gap, open up a doorway that enables us to begin to see the workings of those habits, begin to see the possibility of actually having a choice. We don’t have to be just swept on and on and round and round, we have a choice. We can actually begin to recreate ourselves anew and can open up this doorway of awareness. Mindfulness is important in opening up this doorway. As we open up this doorway we can begin to step off this wheel that goes round and round and step onto a spiral path. A spiral path of creative and open-ended possibilities that find their realization in the Mandala of the Five Jinas, the Five Conquerors, the Five Buddhas. We saw how this mandala, that represents the highest and most beautiful possibilities that are there in us as human beings, can be entered and explored through this same doorway that is there all the time, ever present in each moment in our lives. How we can enter this magic circle of the Mandala of the Five Buddhas, this temple of the Five Jinas. As we enter this world, we enter a world of the imagination. A world of “once upon a time” and a world “out of time” – a whole new dimension of possibility, of beauty, of magic, of mystery that is there in life and which can begin to unfold for us.

And as we entered into this mysterious mandala, this magical circle, we first of all came across a wrathful figure - a terrifying figure that seemed incredibly threatening, overwhelming and awful. We saw how this figure seems terrifying because our sense of “self,” our sense of a “me” that doesn’t want to change is threatened. How will we begin to let go of that? We begin to let go when we stop holding on so tightly to this sense of “me.” When we begin to open our hearts to all that is there as possible in us, in the world, then that terrifying figure becomes immediately a figure that is radiant, beautiful and invited. So this terrifying figure that we met as we entered through the east of the mandala is transformed into the beautiful, radiant, dark blue figure of Akshobya. Akshobya, with his hand reaching down to touch the earth, in this mudra - a gesture of “touching the earth.” This dark blue Buddha with his mirror-like wisdom and unshakeability. This dark blue Buddha, whose emblem is the *vajra*, the diamond thunderbolt that breaks through all obstacles.

And then we travelled on round towards the south. There we met the golden Buddha of

the south, Ratnasambhava. His right hand stretched out in the gesture of giving, that beautiful gesture of openhanded and openhearted generosity. Ratnasambhava's animal - the animal of his throne - is the white horse streaming with bright free energy. Ratnasambhava, golden, the jewel born, full of riches and full of beauty.

And tonight we travel on. We travel on round to the west and we meet Amitabha, the ruby red Buddha of the west. In these talks, we do not just want to impart information to you about Buddhism and about the Buddhas. What we want to do, as we explore this Mandala of the Five Jinas, is to dwell on the qualities of the Buddha and dwell on the qualities of the enlightened mind. It's been said, "What we dwell on, that we become." And it's well worth asking ourselves, "What do we habitually dwell on? What sort of images do we dwell on?"

How many of you here, for example, have been to see *Alien Resurrection* recently? How many of you have had the images of a film like that embedded in your consciousness and found it very difficult to get them out for one, two or three weeks? How many of us have actually dwelt regularly on a figure like that of the Buddha, a figure like that of Amitabha? Figures that actually represent what is highest and most beautiful within us as human beings. I think it's well worth asking ourselves, "What we dwell on? Where are our minds resting - hour by hour, minute by minute through the day? What are we actually making ourselves and of ourselves through what we dwell on?"

So, tonight we are going to dwell on Amitabha Buddha, and hopefully become a little more like Amitabha.

Reminders of the Buddha: The stupa and living presence

To begin with there was the Buddha, there was Shakyamuni. Gautama, the Enlightened Teacher, wandering the byways, roads and villages of ancient India, meeting whoever came his way, speaking to them, responding to them, teaching. Just one man - sometimes alone, sometimes with one or two companions, sometimes with quite a band of disciples - but just one man, and he could only be in one place at a time. As the years went by, and he taught for over forty years, he had more and more disciples. But some of those disciples had never even seen him and others only saw him very rarely. Yet for all of them he was a real living presence. He was alive amongst them even though he might have been hundreds of miles away in a distant city or in a distant jungle. There was a custom amongst his disciples, even whilst he was still alive, to keep a seat whenever they gathered. There was a seat made ready for the Buddha, just in case he appeared. So they always had that sense of the Buddha being there amongst them.

After his death they would remind themselves of his presence by building stupas. Stupas were originally funerary monuments in which some of the ashes or remains of the Buddha or other Teachers would be placed. At other times a wheel was depicted, particularly when they wished to remember the Buddha as teacher, as communicating the Dharma. At other times, they were reminded of the Buddha by a tree, there would be the

tree under which he gained Enlightenment as a reminder of his Enlightenment. At other times a footprint represented his presence as he wandered among them in ancient India.

But, amongst all of these, the stupa was probably the earliest and most pervasive of these reminders of the Buddha in the Buddhist tradition. For Buddhists - not just early Buddhists, but Buddhists right down through the centuries - the stupa isn't just a monument. It actually is the Buddha. It's a living presence, it's a living presence of Enlightenment amongst them. The stupa was actually seen not just as stone or as an object of devotion, but mysteriously, even magically acting as a sort of doorway to this meeting of, and with, the Buddha - meeting with his wisdom and compassion. The stupa stood there as an imaginative doorway through which his disciples could actually contact that living presence of his wisdom, of his Enlightenment that had come into being in the world when he gained Enlightenment. In time statues were carved, particularly after the meeting with the ancient Greeks who had moved across into Asia with Alexander. The familiar figure of the meditating Buddha or the earth-touching Buddha began to appear. These weren't just seen as statues, they were seen as doorways through which one could imaginatively contact the Buddha.

But again, it wasn't just through the physical presences of a stupa or statue that Buddhists over the centuries have made that imaginative connection with the Buddha as a living presence. Many had visions, visions in which that inner faculty of the imagination was awoken, where the Buddha appeared to them as a figure. Some of these figures assumed different aspects, different colors, and different gestures. All these act as symbols, pointing towards particular aspects of the Enlightened mind, towards wisdom, towards compassion, towards energy and so on. The Five Jinas, the Five Buddhas, they all represent different aspects of this wonderful, mysterious figure of the Buddha, of Buddhahood and of the Enlightened heart and mind.

In describing Amitabha tonight, I'm going to be evoking, and maybe even invoking, something of the Buddha - trying to, as it were, conjure up through dwelling on this figure that was envisioned in the ancient Buddhist tradition. Through evoking that image we can get some glimpse of the Buddha himself and of his presence.

The Jewel of the Mandala: Amitabha the red Buddha of the West

We can say that the figures of the Mandala of the Five Jinas are like facets of a jewel. As you look at that jewel it flashes with different colors. Sometimes it flashes blue, yellow, red, green or white. It's the same jewel, but one looks at it from different aspects. Tonight the jewel is reflecting back this beautiful ruby red light and as we gaze into that light we see and dwell on, from this particular angle, the qualities of the Buddha and of the Enlightened mind.

Amitabha is a ruby red figure and he sits in meditation posture on a red lotus. Well, actually, Amitabha isn't red and he doesn't sit in meditation posture on a red lotus. What we see when we look at this red figure sitting in meditation on a red lotus is a map. When

we look at a map, it can help us to find our way into a territory, it can help us to explore the countryside and discover its mysteries and beauties. This map, this particular outline and form and way of describing Amitabha, can be a useful way of beginning to approach the qualities that are Amitabha but which are also beyond form, beyond any narrow definition.

On a much more mundane level, a person is not a name. When doing communication exercises, you sit next to a person and you look at them and you begin to get a sense that there's much more to them than that initial configuration of eyes, nose, ears, dress, name and way of speaking which you at first have seen. One begins to sense depth beyond, and depths to that person. We look at a photograph and we say, "Oh yes, that's so-and-so." But what we are actually looking at is a piece of paper with some colors on it; we are not seeing the person at all. But that piece of paper with the colors on it enables us to begin to enter in with our imagination and understanding to recall that person, to recall what they are really like. So too, this image of Amitabha is like a doorway that enables us to begin to get a sense of this mysterious, magical quality of the Buddha, of the Enlightened Mind. What I am going to be describing, as I describe Amitabha, is a doorway. So try not to get stuck in the doorframe. Try to have that sense of looking beyond, looking behind, and looking through that imaginative sense. Let your imagination work with you as you explore this figure with me. Allow your heart and imagination to engage.

A Reading from the *Shurangama Sutra*: the world of the Five Jinas (Conquerors)

To evoke something of the mood of the exploration that we are going to be engaging in, I am going to read you a section from the *Shurangama Sutra*, which evokes very beautifully the quality of this world that we are entering as we travel through the Mandala of the Five Jinas.

Thereupon, the blessed Lord, sitting upon his throne in the midst of the Tathagatas and highest Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas from all the Buddha-lands, manifested his Transcendent Glory surpassing them all. From his hands and feet and body radiated supernal beams of light that rested upon the crowns of each Tathagata, Bodhisattva-Mahasattva, and Prince of the Dharma; in all the ten quarters of the universes, went forth rays of glorious brightness that converged upon the crown of the Lord Buddha and upon the crowns of all the Tathagatas, Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas and Arhats present in the assembly. At the same time all the trees of the Jeta Park, and all the waves lapping on the shores of its lakes, were singing with the music of the Dharma, and all the intersecting rays of brightness were like a net of splendour set with jewels and over-reaching them all. Such a marvellous sight had never been imagined and held them all in silence and awe. Unwittingly, they passed into the blissful peace of the Diamond Samadhi and upon them all, there fell like a gentle rain, the soft petals of many different coloured lotus blossoms – blue and crimson, yellow and white – all blending together and being reflected into the open space of heaven in all the tints of the spectrum. Moreover, all the differentiations of mountains and seas and rivers and forests of the Saha World blended

into one another and faded away leaving only the flower-adorned unity of the Primal Cosmos, not dead and inert but alive with rhythmic life and light, vibrant with transcendental sound of songs and rhymes, melodiously rising and falling and merging and then fading away into silence.

~ *Shurangama Sutra*

So, a very beautiful evocation of that world which we are now journeying in and exploring.

Amitabha - Infinite Light; Amitayus – Infinite Life

Amitabha's name means Infinite Light. There's also a reflex of Amitabha, another aspect of him called Amitayus, who is known Infinite Life. So in Amitabha, we have infinity. Infinity extending in space - Infinite Light; infinity extending in time – Infinite Life. Infinite time and infinite space are reflected in Amitabha.

Amitabha dwells in the west, is the Buddha of the west. For a European, the west has a number of definite connotations. To the west is the Atlantic, this great expanse of sea that can seem to extend into infinity. It's the direction of the setting sun. The setting sun which sinks into the sea. To travel west is to travel into the unknown, in involves a journey into the unknown, into new frontiers. A journey that can be dangerous and that one might never return from. "Go west young man, go west." Wherever in the world we come from, the west is the direction of the setting sun.

With the setting sun, we have the mood of evening, the mood of sunset - that time when a quiet magical mood can settle on the earth after the busyness of the day. Suddenly there's a certain stillness that can seem to descend, just at this time of sunset everything can seem to become quiet and peaceful. It's the end of the busyness of the day, its time to rest, to come back to ourselves. Time to weigh up, assess, prepare for a new beginning. Very often we will think of a sunset, the sun setting into the sea. In Bhante Sangharakshita's vision of Amitabha that he had in his early days as a wanderer he saw in his vision the sun setting into the sea. So in the sun setting into the sea, we might conjure up images or associations with the light of consciousness. The sun meeting the unconscious depths of the sea, a meeting of light and mysterious depth and darkness, the heights and depths coming together with this setting sun, this mood of sunset and the evening. With that there are associations with the mood of meditation, the end of the busyness of the day - a time to come back to ourselves with the busyness of the day over, a time to recollect ourselves, a time to bring the light of our awareness and with it, to begin to explore the depths of our unconscious. Amitabha sits in the mudra of meditation, his hands rest lightly one in the other, the thumbs gently meeting. This mudra, this gesture, is one of great beauty, poise and stillness, with the hands just so lightly and delicately resting together. At the same time there's this sense of completeness, of a circle completed. The arms, the head, the hands, they are all together – a circle. Something complete and integrated, something whole. There's a great beauty

in this very simple gesture of meditation.

Then there is the beauty of a sunset, that tremendous richness of the setting sun – it's not a dull red, there's a fiery richness to that setting sun that seems to draw us in. A universal custom among human beings around the world seems to be that they will be stopped by the sunset. People will stop and gaze at the sunset and at the beauty of that blazing redness as it sinks below the horizon. A time to stop, a time to gaze, and a time just to be with the present moment, with that incredible richness and fleeting, passing beauty that is always unique. Every sunset is different - the configuration of the clouds, the way it all comes together - every time there's something different, something unique about the sunset. The sun which earlier in the day might have seemed fiery, burning, even harsh in some parts of the world, at the time of the sunset becomes gentle and inviting. Its beauty invites us in. Earlier in the day we might have had to hide from the sun, it might have bent us with its heat and strength, but now at this time of day, at the time of Amitabha, at the time of the evening it becomes gentle, beautiful and inviting.

And red, this ruby red, this rich, rich red of the setting sun is the color which we associate with the heart, with emotions, with blood, with life, with vitality. Amitabha is associated with a great depth of emotional richness. He's associated particularly with metta, with love and with compassion. He is the head of the lotus family and sits on a red lotus. Avalokiteshvara, the great Bodhisattva of Compassion is his chief son. Amitabha sits on this beautiful red lotus and in Bhante's/Sangharakshita's vision, Amitabha rather than sitting in meditation actually holds up a red lotus in his right hand. The lotus in the Buddhist tradition is a great symbol of spiritual unfoldment. The lotus grows in the mud, out of the depths of the mud and filth at the bottom of a pool, maybe even a dirty half stagnant pool. It grows up from the mud, its roots remaining in the mud, through the water into the sunshine. So out of the mud, but still rooted in it, emerges something of exquisite beauty and exquisite delicacy. The lotus opens in response to certain conditions - to the moisture, to the warmth of the sun. It can't be rushed, if you try and pry open a lotus, the bud of any flower, you actually destroy that beauty. It has to unfold in its own time and so too in our own spiritual lives we have to respond to the warmth of the Dharma, respond to the warmth of metta and friendship and we have to allow ourselves and others to unfold in their own time and at the same time we can do all we can to ensure those conditions of warmth and moisture and their spiritual equivalents are there so that this unfoldment can take place as fully and as completely as possible.

Amitabha's robe and begging bowl

Amitabha, as he sits on his lotus, in one way is a curious mixture in the way he is dressed. He wears the robe of a monk, but it's not a dirty robe made up of bits and pieces found on refuse heaps which the Buddha himself and the monks traditionally wore. Rather, it's a robe made of precious silks, woven with the most beautiful threads. It's a most exquisite diaphanous silken material. So at one and the same time, the Buddha is a monk, one who has given up everything, one who has nothing and is at the same time a king, a ruler, a Conqueror, a Jina who has everything. In this figure wearing this rich robe, we have this

coming together of the man who has nothing and the man who has everything. The king and the beggar come together in the Conqueror, in the Jina. This is true of all the Jinas, I'm just bringing it out tonight in talking about Amitabha.

And then, the begging bowl, which in some representations of Amitabha just rests gently on those meditating hands. The beggar and the monk both indicate an attitude of complete openness to life, of receptivity. One simply accepts what life brings. One doesn't grasp at anything or seek after anything for oneself. One simply accepts what comes. Traditionally, the Buddhist monk doesn't ask for his food. In the guidelines the Buddha gave to his monks as they went out on their begging rounds to the village, he urged them not to just go to the houses of the richest people who they knew they would get good grub from straightaway but rather they should go to the first house they came to and just stand there silently at the door with their begging bowl until they were noticed. Accepting whatever was given, they would then go onto the next house, and then to the next house until they had enough to eat and then they would just go away and take that. They would never ask, they didn't just bang on the door and say, "Hi, anybody in there? How about a bit of food for a poor monk?" They simply stood there and waited until they were noticed and either given something or told to go away. So in the begging bowl we have this tremendous symbol of this attitude of openness, accepting-ness, non-grasping and readiness to take a life as it comes, not wanting to make it other than what it is.

Again this is an attitude which we can bring to our meditation. The begging bowl sits on the meditating hands. We can bring to meditation this attitude of openness, acceptance, this un-grasping attitude that allows this organic unfoldment that doesn't try and manufacture higher states of consciousness or manufacture some sort of spirituality – that doesn't try to make things happen but is prepared to just let go of the old habits, let go of the old grasping, and allow something quite new to come into being. So again there's this mysterious coming together of the king, the ruler, the Conqueror, the Jina, who has everything, and the beggar who has nothing.

The Peacock of Amitabha

Each of the Jinas has these animals that sit beneath their thrones and support the thrones. The animal of Amitabha is the peacock. The peacock is a bird of great beauty, but quite a strange beauty in some ways. There are very, very strong colors, the incredible, very brilliant turquoise of its neck and the magnificence of its tail with its many eyes. The peacock though, whilst its form is very beautiful, its cry is very shrill. Peacocks were sometimes used not just for their beauty but also as guard birds because they would let out their cries when a stranger came along. So the peacock is a sort of guardian, and a guardian in another way as well, because they feed on snakes. The peacock will pounce on a snake, and will eat a poisonous snake. So again, they will protect the household, the place where they are kept, from snakes. It is as if they can transmute that poison of the snake into that incredible beauty of their plumage. In Buddhist iconography there is a blue-throated Avalokiteshvara. Avalokiteshvara is this Bodhisattva figure - he represents

compassion - and there's one particular depiction of him where he has a blue throat. The idea here is that he takes the suffering and the poisons of our suffering of the world on himself. Takes them into himself and thereby transmutes them and transforms them into something beautiful and that appears in this blue throat that we see in these depictions of him.

And then there is this tail, this great fan of the peacock's tail with its many eyes. That tail is quite reminiscent of some depictions that we see of the 1,000-armed Avalokiteshvara. The 11-headed and 1,000-armed Avalokiteshvara that has this great fan of arms all around him and it's as if he is reaching out to beings in all the realms of life with these many hands. It's compassion finding any way it can to reach out and alleviate the suffering of others. Painted in each hand is an eye, just like these eyes on a peacock's tail. These eyes, these eyes of wisdom, which mean that it's not just a sentimental reaching out in pity but it's a compassion that is imbued with wisdom so that there is a real understanding, a real skill, a real appropriateness in the way that Avalokiteshvara reaches out. He reaches out to give people what they really need rather than what they think they want. So there is this aspect as well that we are reminded of - compassion. Compassion particularly associated with Amitabha and his family in this beautiful fan of the peacock with its many eyes.

The Discriminating or All Distinguishing Wisdom of Amitabha

Amitabha's wisdom is the Discriminating Wisdom or the All Distinguishing Wisdom. Whilst the wisdom of Akshobhya that we heard about first is the Mirror Like Wisdom that sees things with complete objectivity, sees things exactly as they are, where there's no distortion and just as Ratnasambhava's wisdom is the wisdom that sees the essential Unity and Oneness of all things, Amitabha's wisdom is the Discriminating Wisdom or All Distinguishing Wisdom which sees all things in their uniqueness, in their diversity. All these different Buddha figures are different facets of the one Jina - each wisdom contains the other. So Amitabha doesn't just see things in their uniqueness and their diversity. That is the main focus or the main aspect or wisdom that is brought out by Amitabha, but at the same time there is that objectivity of the mirror-like wisdom and there is that sense of their unity. So Amitabha doesn't reduce the plurality of things to uniformity. He values, cherishes and delights in the uniqueness of every individual, of every flower, of every moment. His is a wisdom that sees the beauty and uniqueness of every thing and every moment, and at the same time seeing their unity.

The seed syllable of Amitabha is "Hri." This is the sound symbol that encapsulates all the qualities of Amitabha. Hri - that same root - is associated with a couple of very interesting spiritual qualities that one comes across often in the Buddhist tradition - *hiri* and *otapa*, or shame and blame. These are seen as two very positive spiritual qualities. Shame (*hiri*) is when we are actually ashamed of our unskillfulness, when we recognize that we've done something that has caused hurt or harm to others, and we actually feel shame. Blame (*otapa*) is when we have actually done something that our spiritual friends, those who we look up to, those who we feel they put our trust in us and we've let

them down. So there is that sense of blame that we feel. These are both seen as very positive qualities, that we actually have this sense of shame, when we act unskillfully, and that we actually measure ourselves against our spiritual friends and teachers and actually feel that gap when we have behaved in a way that we know goes against the best in us, that they would hope for from us. Shame and blame are associated with blushing, with the redness, and again with Amitabha. So the Hri of Amitabha is connected with the hiri, the sense of redness, the shame that comes when we act unskillfully.

Sukhavati - The Pure Land of Amitabha

There's a Pure Land associated with Amitabha, this is the pure land of Sukhavati. Sukhavati means "full of bliss." A Pure Land is a very special realm that is outside the Six Realms, outside of the *dhyanas*. It's a special realm built through the activities of Bodhisattvas into which beings can be born and where the ideal conditions are set up for them to move towards enlightenment, move towards the realization of wisdom and compassion. So Bodhisattvas, out of their efforts, create these Pure Lands, create these conditions which really support others in their efforts to Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels - to actually transform themselves in the light of wisdom and compassion. You could say that part of the myth of our Movement, of the Western Buddhist Order and of the FWBO, is to create a Pure Land, to create a world within the world where there are these supportive conditions, where it does become possible for more and more men and women to actually lead an effective spiritual life. We are actually trying to create something of a Pure Land within the very impure land of our modern world. So, the Pure Land of Sukhavati - Amitabha's Pure Land of Sukhavati - was established by a Bodhisattva called Dharmakara, who many aeons before had taken this vow that he would create a Pure Land in which beings could be reborn if only they recited the name of Amitabha. So this Pure Land was created, and the myth goes that one had to simply recite Amitabha to be reborn in Sukhavati, and Dharmakara became Amitabha. To be reborn in Sukhavati meant that one was reborn within a flower, from within which one would just hear in the sounds of the trees, the wind and the streams, that everything would be teaching the Dharma. As the petals of the flower opened one would be able to step out into this world where everything spoke of the Dharma. This whole myth of Amitabha and his Pure Land of Sukhavati came to be the foundation of a very important stream in Buddhism of what became known as Pure Land Buddhism. Here the main practice was just reciting the name of Amitabha and where the great emphasis was on faith, on cultivating a faith in Amitabha, a faith in reciting his name, which would allow one to be reborn into a Pure Land and thence to gain enlightenment.

Faith as Metta

I want to say a bit at this point about faith, and the Buddhism of faith, and faith in the spiritual life. It's sometimes been said that if we think in terms of metta, then when metta is directed towards those who suffer it becomes compassion. When it is directed towards those who are happy, who are well, it becomes rejoicing in merit. When it's directed

towards the ideal, it becomes faith. So where this strong emotional response is directed towards our ideals, the highest potential within us, we have faith. I think faith is a spiritual faculty that we often underestimate, that we just don't take very seriously in ourselves and we don't really recognize in ourselves. We just don't think of ourselves as belonging to a culture where faith is really that appropriate. We feel the need to be questioning and skeptical and we often experience ourselves as being more intellectual and so on. I think we don't often recognize the faith that is there and this brings me to a point that I often find myself talking about in discussion and study groups these days on Going For Refuge retreats. This is the distinction between depth and intensity, and I think we often confuse the two.

We often overlook depth and look for intensity. With faith we often overlook a quiet depth that can be there in us that is actually directing our lives, motivating our lives. We just don't actually take it seriously because we are looking for an intensity, we are looking for strongly felt immediate experiences, like really strong devotional feelings – an immediately felt warm glow that we can actually get hold of as it were. We don't take seriously a lot that's often going on in our lives.

Just as an analogy, I remember once standing in Holland on top of a hill (they actually do have a few hills in Holland) and looking out across this huge river flowing down to the sea. It must have been half a mile across – this great silver-grey stream of water, with lots of boats and ships on it. This huge expanse of water, much, much bigger than one would ever see in this country and yet it was so still that it hardly seemed to be moving. It was only when I really thought about it that I realized there was this tremendous weight, probably millions of tons of water, steadily and relentlessly moving towards the sea. If you compare that to a little bubbling stream that you might meet out in the hills somewhere which can seem very energetic and alive and there's a lot happening, then I think it can be like that with us. We look for intensity, we look for something bubbly and interesting, and if that is not there we think that faith isn't happening. When actually sometimes, when you look at people and you talk with people they say, "Oh I'm not really a faith type, I don't have much faith." But then that person may have given up a job, moved into a community, is working for very little in a business, and helping to run a Buddhist centre. Their whole life is actually moving towards an ever-deeper involvement with the Three Jewels. There is something within them responding to the beauty of the ideal. Their whole life is actually being shaped more and more by it, but they don't recognize it and don't take it seriously. And because they don't take it seriously then they are not allowing that faith which is actually there to be the force, the directing and shaping force that it could be in our lives. So I think that faith is a faculty that we could all take a lot more seriously and look for in ourselves, recognize a lot more within ourselves, value a lot more in ourselves, and look to build on, value and cherish within ourselves and in others so that this faculty of faith can really be an ever stronger force carrying us towards enlightenment.

The Way of the White Clouds – Lama Govinda

So we have looked at a number of different aspects of Amitabha. I hope through dwelling on them, just giving ourselves time to take them in, dwell on them, mull them over and reflect on them that we begin to get a sense of some of those qualities of the Enlightened mind that this figure of Amitabha offers us a doorway and entrance to. One of the first books on Buddhism that I read was a book by Lama Govinda called *The Way of the White Clouds*. It's a lovely book. It has Dharma - there are other teachings of Buddhism in there - there's adventure, and there are all sorts of strange and wonderful people. There are these long-gone runners, these Tibetan monks who develop a trance and then run in great leaps over huge boulders and great distances. There are great Tibetan masters, one of whom performs miracles lasting several hours, which involves great hosts of Bodhisattvas appearing in the sky. And these great mandaravas, flowers, falling out of the sky and landing on the ground and dissolving a few hours later. There is a great cosmic vision conjured up by this master and seen by many, many people at this particular time in Tibet. It involves discussion of rebirth, it includes speculation about Lama Govinda's own rebirth. It involves getting lost in snowstorms. It involves discovering secret entrances to ruined temples, with their walls covered in beautiful paintings. So it's quite a book and one of my very first introductions to Buddhism, to which I've gone back and probably enjoyed as much, if not more, in rereading in later years.

A little later in the early seventies, I was in India and visited the house where Lama Govinda had been living in Almora in the foothills of the Kumaon, and I saw a stupa that he had built there. It was a very beautiful stupa, in the style of someone standing on the top of a hill looking out over the countryside. He himself was away in America at the time. Later still I discovered that Lama Govinda was a close friend of Sangharakshita and they had a real sense of spiritual brotherhood and a real affinity.

So in this book, *The Way of the White Clouds*, at the very end, there is a verse that rounds up the book which is an invocation to the Buddha of Infinite Light, which Lama Govinda wrote in the early sixties while he was staying at this home in the foothills of the Himalayas that I visited. So I'm going to finish now by reading this verse:

*To the Buddha of Infinite Light
Who is meditated upon while facing the setting sun,
when the day's work is accomplished and the mind is at peace.*

Amitabha!

*Thou who liveth within my heart,
Awaken me to the immensity of thy spirit,
To the experience of thy living presence!
Deliver me from the bonds of desire,
From the slavery of small aims,
From the delusion of narrow egoism!*

Enlighten me with the light of thy wisdom,

*Suffuse me with the incandescence of thy love,
Which includes and embraces the darkness,
Like the light that surrounds the dark coil of the flame,
Like the love of a mother that surrounds
The growing life in the darkness of her womb,
Like the earth protecting the tender germ of a seed.*

*Let me be the seed of thy living light!
Give me the strength to burst the sheath of selfhood,
And like the seed that dies in order to be reborn,
Let me fearlessly go through the portals of death,
So that I may awaken to the greater life:
The all-embracing life of thy love,
The all-embracing love of thy wisdom.*

~ Lama Angarika Govinda, The Way of the White Clouds