

## The Unity of Buddhism

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[Please note that whilst diacritic marks were used where appropriate for Pali and Sanskrit terms in the original publication, due to the lesser technology being used to produce this book they have been omitted!]

*They carved Him out of sandal, chipped from stone  
The Ever-moving, cast in rigid bronze  
Him Who was Life itself, and made Him sit,  
Hands idly folded, for a thousand years  
Immobile in the incensed image-house;  
They gilded Him till He was sick with gold.*

*And underneath the shadow of the shrine  
They sauntered in their yellow silken robes,  
Or - lolled replete on purple-cushioned thrones -  
In sleepy stanzas droned His vigorous words  
To gentle flutterings of jewelled fans...*

*Arise, O Lord, and with Thy dust-stained feet  
Walk not the roads of India but the world!  
Shake from the slumber of a thousand years  
Thy dream-mazed fold! Burn as a Fire for men!'*

In the late summer of 1942, at the age of sixteen, Sangharakshita had the decisive experience of his life. On reading the *Diamond Sutra* he knew for the first time that he was a Buddhist. Sublime as was the teaching of the *Sutra*,

I at once joyfully embraced it with an unqualified acceptance and assent. To me the *Diamond Sutra* was not new. I had known it and believed it and realized it ages before and the reading of the *Sutra* as it were awoke me to the existence of something I had forgotten. Once I realized that I was a Buddhist it seemed that I had always been one, that it was the most natural thing in the world to be, and that I had never been anything else.

He had a similar response to the *Sutra of Hui-neng*, a translation of which he discovered at the same time as the *Diamond Sutra*. Whenever he read it, he was thrown into a 'kind of ecstasy'. The impact of these two spiritual masterpieces has continued to affect him. Recently he has said that he has never seen any reason to doubt the initial insight they precipitated in him. Indeed, it has been the basis for his whole life, from that moment on.

Sangharakshita's discovery that he was a Buddhist and that he had always been one came through direct contact with the inspired utterance of the Enlightened mind, for, although the *Diamond Sutra* is almost certainly not a literal record of the historical Buddha's teaching, its words clearly emanate from a very high level of spiritual experience. The *Sutra*, through paradox and counter-paradox, systematically negates all the categories of Buddhist thought. It leaves nothing for the rational mind to grasp, particularly a mind almost entirely unfamiliar with Buddhist doctrine. The *prajna-paramita* or 'Perfection of Wisdom', which is the subject of the *Sutra*, reveals itself not to the intellect, but only to the uplifted spiritual imagination. It is all the more remarkable that the sixteen-year-old youth should have responded as he did.

Before encountering the *Sutra*, he knew little of Buddhist teaching. He had had no contact with Buddhist culture and he was not to meet another Buddhist for a further two years. For him, Buddhism was therefore nothing but the supra-rational insight to which the *Diamond Sutra* had introduced him. Buddhism was the Dharma: the pure and undiluted truth about the nature of reality, communicated from the lips of the Buddha of the *Sutra* who himself embodied that truth. The Dharma was, for Sangharakshita, beyond all thought and all culture. In a sense, it was therefore eternal and omnipresent. This is perhaps partly what he means when he says that the *Diamond Sutra* was not new to him when he first heard it.

Sangharakshita's insight into the meaning of the *Diamond Sutra* enabled him to see from the outset the underlying unity of Buddhism. Extraordinary though it may seem, he first perceived the truth of the Dharma at the point where words dissolve into paradox and the rational intellect is confounded. He saw, from the first, the entirely transcendental nature of the Buddha's Enlightenment - transcendent, that is, over all our normal ways of knowing, accessible only to the eye of Wisdom. If the Dharma is, by its very nature, beyond all thinking, then no one expression of it can claim to be exhaustive. Words and concepts can only be 'fingers pointing to the moon', as the Zen saying has it: they can only indicate a higher truth that they can never fully capture. Sangharakshita has therefore always seen the various schools and traditions as so many attempts to express that single transcendent experience that he first encountered in the *Diamond Sutra*. Indeed, his first published work on Buddhism, written at the age of eighteen, was an article on 'The Unity of Buddhism', published in June 1944 in *Buddhism in England* (now *The Middle Way*), the journal of the London Buddhist Society.

Buddhism ... is not one road to Enlightenment but many - although in a deeper and more hidden sense all ways (*dharmas*) are one. It is therefore suited to all sorts and conditions of minds; the youthful and the aged, the melancholy and the joyful, the simple and the profound; it is the universal way of salvation. In its all-embracing unity all the polarities which our arbitrary habits of discrimination have built up since [the] beginning of time, all distinctions of colour, creed, and social position, of ignorant and learned, even of Enlightened and Unenlightened - all these are utterly obliterated.

An understanding of this would seem to be integral to Buddhism itself, yet it has not always been unequivocally shared by all Buddhists. This is not, in a sense, surprising. In the elaboration of the Buddha's original teaching by the different schools, quite diverse, even contrary, teachings and practices arose. Those divergences were then compounded by transmission through the various cultures of Asia. It has not been easy to see all Buddhism's many manifestations as equally striving for the same transcendental goal. Buddhists have therefore often identified the Dharma with their own particular brand. Fortunately, such Buddhist sectarianism has been altogether of a milder kind than is often found in Christianity, yet ignorance of other schools or indifference to them is widespread.

From the very outset of his career as a Buddhist, Sangharakshita did not identify with any particular school, nor did he conceive of Buddhism in terms of any one of its many cultural forms. This perspective gave him the freedom of the entire Buddhist tradition. He could draw sustenance and inspiration from whatever source was available to him, according to his unfolding spiritual needs. Before we examine his idea of the unity of Buddhism in more detail we must follow him in his encounters with its various manifestations.

He had begun early on the road to that crucial experience brought to him by the *Diamond Sutra*. It was principally his reading that guided him to Buddhism. At the age of eight he was confined to bed for two years and launched into the world of literature and art. Among other books, he read Charles Kingsley's *Hypatia*, a historical novel about the last of the Neoplatonists in Christian Alexandria. He was deeply impressed by Kingsley's description of the trance into which the beautiful Hypatia falls as her soul flies 'alone to the Alone'. This was his first encounter with the mystical and it made a lasting impression. In Harmsworth's *Children's Encyclopaedia* he read the lives of the world's great religious leaders. The Buddha must have made a particular impression on him, even at this age, for he wrote a life of the great sage, which he copied in purple ink on his best notepaper. He learnt of Plato too, when he was about ten, and sent his mother to the local public library for a copy of the *Republic*, the first work of philosophy he read.

Although baptised into the Church of England, Sangharakshita received little formal religious education and his parents put him under no pressure to attend services. Indeed, they themselves showed decidedly heterodox tendencies and dabbled in some of the more obscure popular religious movements of the time, such as spiritualism, the Rechabites, the Druids, and Coué's New Thought. When he was eleven, mainly for social reasons, he joined the Boys' Brigade - a quasi-military organisation similar to the Boy Scouts, formed to encourage the leading of a Christian life. His company was attached to the local Baptist church and so he began attending Bible classes and Sunday services. Although he did experience some temporary fervour for the person of Christ, the simple emotionalism of the Baptists made little lasting impression on him. He was, even then, already thinking for himself on religious matters and said his daily prayers to the Buddha, Christ, and Mohammed in turn,

it being my naïve conviction that by this means I should be sure of gaining the ear of whoever happened to be the true saviour.<sup>10</sup>

When he was evacuated to Devon at the age of fourteen to avoid the London Blitz, the young Dennis read more deeply in the great philosophical and religious classics of the West: the works of Plato, Aristotle, and Longinus, for instance. It was however those of Seneca and of the emperor Julian 'the Apostate' that most deeply impressed him. He began also to read some of the classics of the East: the

*Vedas and Upanishads*. Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Song Celestial*, a verse translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, he read 'in a state bordering on ecstasy'. However, the book that most deeply affected him at this period was Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*. Reading this convinced him

that I was not a Christian - that I never had been, and never would be - and that the whole structure of Christian doctrine was from beginning to end thoroughly repugnant to me. This realization gave me a sense of relief, of liberation as from some oppressive burden, which was so great that I wanted to dance and sing for joy. What I was, what I believed, I knew not, but what I was not and what I did not believe, that I knew with utter certainty, and this knowledge, merely negative though it was as yet, gave me a foretaste of that freedom which comes when all obstacles are removed, all barriers broken down, all limitations transcended.<sup>11</sup>

The fifteen-year-old boy who returned to London in 1940 was in a state of intense fervour. He was liberated from the oppressive influence of Christianity. The words of the great masters of philosophy and literature rang in his ears. Moreover, his senses were stirring with the onset of puberty. At this time, he had various spontaneous psychic experiences in which he would foresee a sequence of events that would take place half an hour or an hour later. He also began to have what can only be described as mystical experiences. These were of two principal kinds: he would experience in one 'the complete absurdity of the mind being tied down to a single physical body'<sup>12</sup> and in the other the total unreality of the ordinary world. It was at this time of turbulence and heightened intensity that he encountered the *Diamond Sutra* and that it made its profound and decisive impact upon him.

Although his first encounter was with the Mahayana tradition as expressed in the *Diamond Sutra*, he read as widely in all schools of Buddhism as was then possible. Books on the subject and translations of scriptures were, however, still comparatively rare. The most accessible texts were those of the Pali Canon, the greater part of which had early been translated into English. This was the scriptural collection of the Theravada and it was this South-east Asian school, with its yellow-robed monks, that was most well known in the West. Until he settled in Kalimpong almost all the Buddhists he met in India and Sri Lanka were Theravadins. When he came to seek ordination, without really considering the matter, it was to the Theravada that he looked. This was not because he especially wanted to identify himself with that school. He took ordination from Theravadins because they were the ones who happened to be accessible to him in India. However, he had also unquestioningly imbibed the popular image of the Buddhist monk as yellow-robed. It was therefore a yellow-robed monk he became. For him, however, ordination represented renunciation of the world, complete dedication to the Buddhist path, and acceptance into the Buddhist community *as a whole*. Perhaps somewhat naively, he had not thought about which school he was being ordained into.

From his arrival in the East, he had begun to form considerable reservations about the Theravada School. He certainly had a great love and respect for the Pali Canon, which it had successfully preserved. However he saw that modern Theravadins, with a few notable exceptions, showed little spiritual vitality. Buddhism in Sri Lanka 'seemed dead, or at least asleep'.<sup>13</sup> He encountered among many Theravadins a strong conviction that theirs was the only true and pure form of Buddhism, all others being degenerations and distortions. His own first teacher, Jagdish Kashyap, though himself a Theravadin, confirmed him in his reservations. The Indian monk openly acknowledged the shortcomings of the school to which he belonged. While he taught Sangharakshita much about the Pali scriptures, he never denigrated other schools or claimed any special place for his own. Throughout his time in India, Sangharakshita constantly found himself confronted by the arrogance, narrow-mindedness, and literalism of many Theravadins. In his editorials for *Stepping-Stones* and the *Maha Bodhi* he continuously drew attention to these failings.

In Kalimpong, Sangharakshita wore the yellow robe and was in friendly contact, through the Maha Bodhi Society, with many Theravadin monks from various countries. He was forced, however, to look to other sources for his principal spiritual inspiration. His first years on his own, 'working for the good of Buddhism', were exceptionally difficult. He faced lack of co-operation and occasionally outright opposition, even from those who were nominally helping him. He derived no support from the order to which he belonged. Indeed, it was from some members of that order that he experienced the most open hostility. His guidance and support were to come not from any earthly agency but from that sublime ideal of the Bodhisattva, which is the very heart of the Mahayana schools of Buddhism. The Bodhisattva, who dedicates him or herself for countless existences to the spiritual welfare of all beings,

provided me with an example, on the grandest possible scale, of what I was myself trying to do within my own infinitely smaller sphere and on an infinitely lower level.<sup>14</sup>

From the time of discovering that he was a Buddhist this ideal had inspired him, central as it is to both the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Sutra of Hui-neng*. It came now to have a deeper and more powerful influence on him in his present spiritual isolation. Nonetheless, it was several years before he felt himself ready to take the Bodhisattva ordination, thus formally espousing the Bodhisattva Ideal and adding

Mahayana ordination to his 'Hinayana' ones as a *samanera* and *bhikkhu*. In 1962 he took from Dhardo Rimpoche the sixty-four Bodhisattva vows that constitute the ordination. This Gelugpa 'incarnate lama' had become his close friend and teacher and Sangharakshita had come to revere him as himself a living Bodhisattva.

In Kalimpong Sangharakshita could meet many Tibetan teachers and study Tibetan Buddhism at first hand. He was impressed by the Tibetans' acceptance of all three *yanas* or 'paths', the three major currents in the development of Buddhism: Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. He also found himself deeply moved by the intense but simple faith of ordinary Tibetans and the great learning and obvious spiritual stature of several of their leading teachers. Above all he was strongly attracted to the rich symbolic world of Tibetan Buddhism. He came to see Tantric initiation as preserved in the Tibetan tradition as a way of contacting the highest dimension of reality. From 1956 onwards he received several Tantric initiations and practised Vajrayana meditation, as well as studying the Vajrayana extensively. Besides receiving initiation and teaching from a number of prominent Tibetan lamas, Sangharakshita gained considerable guidance in this field from Mr C.M.Chen, a Chinese hermit living in Kalimpong. Yogi Chen was a very learned man who had practised the Vajrayana intensively for many years. He was also well versed in Ch'an, the Chinese antecedent of the Japanese Zen School, thus giving Sangharakshita first hand knowledge of that important tradition.

Sangharakshita's openness to the entire Buddhist tradition found expression in his personal practice of meditation techniques derived from different schools. Reading as widely as he could, he kept abreast of most new Buddhist publications in English, whether translations of scriptures or works on all aspects of Buddhism, including those of scholarly research. He also took every opportunity to discuss the Dharma with scholars and monks from various traditions. His nonsectarianism was also manifest in his work for the good of Buddhism. When he came to found his own *vihara* in 1957, it was given the name Triyana Vardhana Vihara, 'the Abode Where the Three Yanas Flourish', by his first Tibetan teacher, Chetul Sangye Dorje. [Footnote: This lama, whose name is variously spelt, is well known for the impression he made on the American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, who mentions him in his *Asian Journals*.]

In a report on the Vihara's first five years of existence, Sangharakshita made clear its commitment to nonsectarian Buddhism:

One of the greatest needs of the Buddhist world today is unity. Not, indeed, unity in the sense of uniformity, much less still in that of centralisation of authority, but in the sense of a deeper and more effective recognition of the basic fact that despite differences, even divergences, of Doctrine and Method, all Buddhist traditions have for their ultimate goal that state of Bodhi or Enlightenment whence the very name of their religion derives. The Triyana Vardhana Vihara has therefore been dedicated by its founder to the study, practice, and dissemination of the total Buddhist tradition.<sup>15</sup>

His friend and 'kindred spirit', Lama Govinda, who shared his vision of Buddhism as transcending school and *yana*, wrote of the Vihara, 'Probably for the first time in the history of Buddhism the Hinayana, Mahayana, and the Vajrayana have found a common centre in the Triyana Vardhana Vihara. This is an important step forward on the road towards the unification of Buddhist tradition.'<sup>16</sup> Modest as were the facilities of the Vihara, its aspiration and its significance were great indeed.

His return to England in 1964 brought him up against sectarianism again. There were two principal Buddhist organisations in London at that time: the Buddhist Society and the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara. Considerable tensions had arisen between them and it was to help resolve these that Sangharakshita had been invited to visit. The Society, under its well-known president, Christmas Humphreys, was in principle open to all Buddhist schools. However, some of the trustees of the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara, which was to be Sangharakshita's base, tended to support a particularly narrow and puritanical brand of Theravada Buddhism. Already, in British Buddhism generally, there was a marked tendency to espouse one or other Eastern school and to ignore - even reject - all others. Sangharakshita did what he could to promote an understanding of the entire tradition, giving notable series of talks on Tibetan Buddhism and on Zen. Above all, in his teaching he emphasised the core of doctrines that all schools hold in common, such as conditioned co-production, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path.

However, he had, in all innocence, antagonised some of the trustees of the Vihara. He taught from the entire Buddhist tradition and not exclusively from the Theravada. He banned a form of meditation, dear to a leading trustee, when he saw that it was causing some people severe mental disturbance. He did not keep austere aloof, but valued friendship and intimacy. He went to the theatre and the opera a few times. He did not keep his hair completely shaved but let it grow an inch or two, in the fashion of Tibetan

monks. He even did not always wear his robes! His failure to operate within the narrow confines of what some of the trustees thought a Theravada monk should teach and do led to his being excluded from the Vihara in 1967.

In many ways, as we have seen, his exclusion was a relief: he was free to start afresh. Almost from his first arrival in 1964 he had doubted whether the Buddhist movement as it was in England at that time could be brought to any health and vitality. He had wanted then to start a new movement. Some of his friends and disciples had persuaded him that it was his duty to work within the existing framework and not cause more division. Now however a new movement could be started that was simply *Buddhist*: based on the fundamental principles of the Dharma and open to the entire Buddhist tradition. To emphasise its nonsectarian character, Sangharakshita invited some Buddhists from other traditions to be present at the first ordinations into the Western Buddhist Order. A Shin priest, a Zen monk, and two Theravadin *bhikkhus*, one from Sri Lanka and one from Thailand, attended the ceremony.

In this new phase of his work, no doubt the most important of his life, Sangharakshita was free to embody his vision of the Dharma fully and without compromise. He no longer had to fit into other people's expectations or follow outworn cultural patterns. The movement he set out to create would be the direct expression of his own understanding of Buddhism's essential principles. One of the most important of those principles is the unity of Buddhism. This we must therefore now explore in greater detail. The unity of Buddhism is a complex notion that can be viewed from several different perspectives: historical, methodological, doctrinal, metaphysical, ethical, social, and, most significantly of all, as a personal spiritual act. In the first place, Sangharakshita's vision of the unity of Buddhism rests upon his understanding of what Buddhism most fundamentally is.

## THE TRANSCENDENTAL UNITY OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism is founded on the Buddha's experience of Enlightenment or *bodhi*, his direct understanding of the true nature of things. All Buddhists accept that the Buddha attained Enlightenment. All accept that he taught the path to Enlightenment. All Buddhists of all schools ultimately derive their own particular doctrines and methods from the Buddha's Enlightened vision of reality: all those doctrines and methods are ultimately directed to the attainment of Enlightenment. It is in this common recognition of the Buddha's Enlightenment experience as the source and goal that the *transcendental unity* of Buddhism lies.

The doctrinal and other differences between the schools are not resolved

by being reduced on their own level one to another or all to a conceptual common denominator, but transcended by referring them to a factor which, being supra-logical, can be the common denominator of contradictory assertions<sup>17</sup>

- that common denominator is, of course, the Buddha's Enlightenment.

However united all schools may be in their ultimate source and goal, their doctrines and methods, even their conceptions of what Enlightenment is, vary considerably. This immediately poses an enormous problem. How are we to decide which are genuinely Buddhist and which are not? What are the criteria for determining what the Dharma is? Sangharakshita looks to the Buddha's own words for a resolution of this problem. The Dharma, as we must more properly call Buddhism as the path to the goal of Enlightenment, is defined by the Buddha in the earliest scriptures in purely pragmatic terms. Sangharakshita quotes two important passages from the Pali Canon. In the first, the Buddha compares the Dharma to a raft that a man uses to cross from one shore, 'full of doubts and fears', to the further shore, 'safe and free from fears'. Once he has crossed to the further shore he has no more use for the raft.

Even so, brethren, using the figure of a raft have I shown you the Dharma, as something to leave behind, not to take with you. Thus, brethren, understanding<sup>18</sup> the figure of the raft, you must [eventually] let go of right teachings, how much more so wrong ones.

In other words, the Dharma is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Sangharakshita further points out that

From the fact that the Dharma is, as the Buddha explicitly declares [in the parable of the raft], essentially that which conduces to the attainment of Enlightenment, it necessarily follows that whatever conduces to the attainment of Enlightenment is the Dharma.<sup>19</sup>

In the second passage, the Buddha confirms this point when he is asked how his teachings can be recognised. He affirms that they are

Whatever teachings conduce to dispassion not to passion, to detachment not to bondage, to decrease of worldly gains not to increase of them, to frugality not to covetousness, to contentment not to discontent,

to solitude not to company, to energy not to sluggishness, to delight in good not delight in evil.... This is the Dharma. This is the Vinaya. This is the Master's Message.<sup>20</sup>

What determines whether a school or teaching is truly Buddhist is not that it contains some particular set of words, practices, customs, or institutions, but that it helps individuals to move towards Enlightenment.

To sum up, the transcendental unity of Buddhism lies in the fact that all schools and traditions acknowledge that same transcendental goal attained by the historical Buddha. Each school or tradition has, however, different means of approaching Enlightenment. In so far as they do in fact lead to the attainment of that goal, those means all represent 'Dharma, Vinaya, and the Master's Message', despite apparent contradictions between them. In this, then, lies the *methodological unity* of Buddhism. Unity in this sense

consists in the fact that, through differences and divergences of doctrine innumerable, all schools of Buddhism aim at Enlightenment, at reproducing the spiritual experience of the Buddha. The Dharma is therefore to be defined not so much in terms of this or that particular teaching, but rather as the sum total of the means whereby that experience may be attained.<sup>21</sup>

## THE HISTORICAL UNITY OF BUDDHISM

Although we may know the general criterion by which to test whether any particular teaching is truly Buddhist, it is not so easy in practice to untangle the immense and sometimes conflicting diversity of Buddhist schools. Modern Buddhists are faced with the whole range of Buddhist traditions. They are confronted not merely by those presently existing, but by those of the past as well, since scholars are revealing ever more about the history of the various schools. How are Buddhists today to understand this vast mass of teachings, practices, cultures, and institutions? How are they to evaluate it? How are they to use it?

In this respect they receive little help from Buddhists of the past. The more sectarian among both ancient Buddhists and their modern representatives have believed that all schools but their own are distortions of and deviations from the Buddha's teaching, themselves retaining the true, pure, and original Message of the Master. This attitude is now widespread among Theravadins - although by no means all are tainted with this sort of sectarianism, while not a few Buddhists of other schools are. Nichiren's followers in Japan have been the most extreme sectarians. They have largely seen theirs as a new dispensation that supersedes and thereby negates all other schools - although, from the point of view of other Buddhists, they themselves are questionably Buddhist.

The most sophisticated - and charitable - approach has been to see all known schools as deriving directly from the Buddha himself. Each school, according to these systems, is seen as enshrining either a particular phase in the Buddha's unfoldment of his teaching or else his response to people at a particular level of development. This approach is exemplified by early Chinese Buddhists, who were confronted with the problem of reconciling diverse teachings since they inherited the entire existing range of Indian Buddhism, all of which they accepted as authentic in spite of apparent discrepancies and contradictions. Chih-i, the most important of the Chinese systematisers and the founder of the Chinese *T'ien-t'ai* School, classified the stages of the Buddhist path according to the *order* in which he thought the Buddha had revealed the various scriptures.

The Tibetans too inherited the vast range of Indian Buddhist teachings. They regarded the Buddha as having taught the three great phases of Indian Buddhism - Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana - to beings of inferior, middling, and superior capacity respectively. Tibetan Buddhists therefore say that the three *yanas* between them constitute the entire spiritual path, from beginning to end. Both the Chinese and the Tibetan perspectives really amount to the same: that the different traditions all embody different aspects and phases of the Buddha's actual, historical teaching. They then grade schools according to their depth and completeness: the higher teachings being those revealing the deepest truths to disciples at the highest stages of the spiritual path.

Tibetan Buddhism inherited this threefold classification into Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana from India. As the Mahayana gradually emerged as a distinct tendency, its adherents had distinguished it from the Hinayana - they distinguished the 'Greater' from the 'Lesser' paths. Later, developments within the Mahayana traditions led to a further *yana* being identified: the Vajrayana - the 'Path of the Thunderbolt' or 'Diamond Path'. This classification was not, of course, used or accepted by all parties. The categorisation of the Buddhist tradition into three *yanas* has nonetheless become widely current in Western discussions of Buddhism and is, in a sense, now unavoidable. However, it is the source of a great deal of confusion.

The problem is that the language of the three *yanas* is used in three distinct ways. First, it is used in a quite neutral sense to classify the various schools of Indian Buddhism and their successors outside India. Secondly, it has been used as a polemical weapon: in itself, the term ‘Hinayana’, or ‘Lesser Path’, is derogatory. Thirdly, it is used to describe three different phases in the spiritual life of all individuals. These three usages are not usually distinguished and therefore lead to much confusion and controversy. As Sangharakshita says,

There is a lot of sorting out that we have to do in this area. It isn’t going to be easy because of the nature of the historical development of Buddhism.<sup>22</sup>

That historical development is extraordinarily complex. We shall see later some of the problems to which that complexity has given rise.

Sangharakshita uses the terminology of the three *yanas* quite freely in his writings and lectures. For much of his career he has broadly accepted the terms as applied within the Tibetan tradition. He has used them to classify Buddhist schools, at the same time identifying them with the three main stages in the spiritual career of the individual - as well, sometimes, as employing ‘Hinayana’ as a term of condemnation. However, he has more recently formed a very different view that supersedes, in a sense even criticises, his own earlier position. It is obviously important to remember this in reading his work.

At that time [in the fifties and early sixties], I was still thinking things over and learning about the Vajrayana. I was never in a hurry to come to conclusions, so when I learned these things I just tried to understand them as they were actually taught. I wasn’t in a hurry to start interpreting in my own way. Since then I have had many years in which to think these things over and come to certain conclusions.<sup>23</sup>

We will now see the outcome of his patient reflection. We will examine, under the headings of the three usages of the *yanas*, his ideas on how the modern Buddhist should relate to the total Buddhist tradition.

## THE YANAS AS A HISTORICAL CLASSIFICATION

First, the *yanas* may be used to describe the three main trends in the historical unfoldment of Buddhism in India. Here there is an immediate and direct conflict between modern scholarship and the traditional perspectives of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism. The modern representatives of the historical schools are inclined to maintain their customary ways of viewing the diversity of Buddhism: seeing the teachings of all schools as directly taught by the Buddha to beings of varying capacities. No doubt, in their familiar contexts these perspectives have their value. However, the development of a more intellectually rigorous approach to history and to the study of literary documents has made these positions untenable. Recent scholarly research has shown that there is little or no historical basis for deriving most Buddhist scriptures directly from the Buddha. Nor are there any grounds for grading scriptures according to stages in his teaching career.

Sangharakshita believes that Buddhists today must take advantage of modern scholarship. They must ensure that their statements about the facts of Buddhism as a historical phenomenon can be supported by evidence that has been critically evaluated. In the first place, they must do so for moral reasons: once facts are known, it becomes a lie to ignore them. More pragmatically, if Buddhists do ignore modern scholarship, they will alienate the sceptically-minded Westerner - as well as the growing numbers throughout the world who accept to some degree the scientific outlook. There is, moreover, no disadvantage to Buddhists in scholarly research into the origins of their religion. Buddhism, Sangharakshita says, unlike Christianity, has nothing to fear from the ‘higher criticism’, the scientific analysis of its texts and other records. The truth of Buddhism does not rest upon the historicity of certain events or upon the divine origins of certain texts. Sangharakshita himself has tried to take modern scholarship into consideration in coming to an understanding of the Buddhist tradition’s development. However, as he is quick to point out, such scholarship is yet in its early stages and new facts are being discovered all the time. Indeed, Sangharakshita’s own early work, particularly as represented by *A Survey of Buddhism*, is itself out of date in certain historical details, as he freely admits.<sup>24</sup>

Modern scholarship has led Sangharakshita to a new perspective on the Buddhist tradition. He accepts that many teachings attributed to the Buddha by various schools were probably not actually taught by him. As each school’s doctrine developed over the centuries, new creations were fathered on the Buddha, to give them the authority of his name. Nonetheless, the fact that these doctrines were probably not taught by the Buddha does not lessen their possible value as means to Enlightenment. Whether taught directly by the Buddha or not, by the Buddha’s own criterion, they may be ‘the Master’s Message’.

Though many Buddhist teachings may not actually have been directly taught by the Buddha, Sangharakshita has nonetheless drawn unfailing personal inspiration from the Buddha’s life. That life, as recounted in the Pali Canon, is a source of example and guidance for him in his own life and work.

He sees that ultimately Buddhism springs from the Buddha's experience of Enlightenment. The Buddha is therefore the basis of the *historical unity* of Buddhism, since all schools descend from him in unbroken historical continuity. The Buddha must therefore be the starting point for a consideration of the Buddhist tradition as a whole.

It is now almost impossible to say with any certainty exactly what words the Buddha spoke - we do not even know precisely which language he used. Nonetheless there is found in the scriptures of all schools, and therefore predating their division from each other, a core of common material about the Buddha's life and teaching. This common core contains what Sangharakshita calls, borrowing a phrase from Christmas Humphreys, 'Basic Buddhism': all the classic formulae of Buddhist doctrine such as conditioned co-production, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Three Characteristics. These are the basic teachings of Buddhism, contained in the oldest texts of all schools and accepted by all Buddhists. On them

rest, as on an unshakeable foundation, the loftiest superstructures and dizziest pinnacles of later Buddhist Doctrine and Method.<sup>25</sup>

They are the necessary starting point for any serious study of Buddhism, for

without a previous knowledge of the earlier formulations of the Buddha's Teaching as preserved in either the Hinayana or the Mahayana collections of canonical literature, understanding of the later and often more elaborate formulations is impossible.<sup>26</sup>

Basic Buddhism then provides the *doctrinal unity* of Buddhism.

Basic Buddhism, as recognised by all schools, is as near as we can get to the original teaching of the Buddha. However, even within the earliest scriptures some evolution can be discerned. Textual analysis reveals that some portions are earlier than others, and behind them we can sense what Sangharakshita has called 'pre-Buddhist Buddhism': Buddhism, in the period immediately following the Buddha's Enlightenment, before he had developed the doctrines and institutions later identified as Buddhism. Behind the formalisms of the texts we catch a glimpse of the Buddha himself, struggling to communicate his experience to others, without the framework of language and thought that became Basic Buddhism. Sangharakshita regards this glimpse as very important. It reveals a picture of the Buddha that, no doubt, strikes a resonance in one who himself is trying to communicate those same truths in a new context. However, its importance is more general. It ensures that we do not see the Buddha as a polished churchman, giving scholarly talks and issuing administrative orders. We see him, Sangharakshita says, more like a wild shaman in the vast and lonely jungle, as yet with few words to convey his new and vital message. This glimpse of the unselfconscious origins of Buddhism helps us to see that spiritual life is something natural and immediate, not necessarily involving sophisticated superstructures of doctrine or organisation.

However, gradually the Buddha did develop the teachings of Basic Buddhism and the institutions of his new movement. After his Enlightenment, the Buddha gradually evolved a body of teachings and a spiritual community that directly expressed his own Enlightened experience. This is Buddhism at its most unified and harmonious.

The equilibrium between its various aspects and elements was necessarily absolute, for it was the product of an Enlightened and hence perfectly balanced mind.<sup>27</sup>

The authority of the Buddha's person and the comprehensiveness of his teaching harmonised all the latent divergences of a growing and disparate movement. Whatever their temperaments or personal inclinations, under his influence all his disciples felt themselves to be members of a single spiritual community, following a single path to a single goal. Sangharakshita calls this period of harmony 'Archaic Buddhism'.

I think one could regard Archaic Buddhism as lasting roughly one hundred years. That is to say, during the Buddha's teaching life and the lifetime of at least the third generation of disciples after him.<sup>28</sup>

Within this era of the Buddha's immediate personal influence, elements of all the later developments in Buddhism are discernible. Out of tendencies present in the Buddha's own teachings gradually emerged new teachings and practices. This is, argues Sangharakshita, a natural and healthy phenomenon. Spiritual life is rich and multifaceted and it is impossible to exhaust every dimension and aspect of it. Comprehensive and profound as was his teaching, the Buddha touched on many themes whose implications he never worked out in detail. Different disciples and groups of disciples developed these tendencies latent in the original teaching, elaborating them more fully and working out those implications.

Another factor in the growing diversity of schools was the necessity of responding to the spiritual needs of different people. Although, in a sense, there is but one spiritual path, no two people follow it in precisely the same way. As general teachings are applied to more and more specific cases, ever more of the Dharma's riches are revealed. Again, Buddhism was spreading into new geographical areas all the



time and conditions were constantly changing in those areas where it was already established. The Dharma had to be communicated appropriately in new cultural and historical circumstances, for it is not a static set of words, fixed for all time; it is a living communication between the Enlightened and the unenlightened that must constantly be renewed and related to the people to whom it is directed, as the Buddha himself clearly recognised.

In elaborating particular aspects of the Dharma, a sense of the integrity of the teachings would often be lost and a one-sidedness would develop. Those following the different trends of the original teachings began to diverge more and more from one another, gradually hardening into distinct schools. As time went on, there were increasing debates and controversies between the different schools, and they often formed their doctrines in dialectical relationship with each other. However, we must be careful not to think of this process as analogous to the historical evolution of Christianity. The successive *yanas* did not arise in the same way as the Protestant Reformation.

Luther for the early part of his life was a Catholic, for there was nothing but Catholicism in Western Europe. He broke away from Catholicism to form something relatively new, which became Lutheranism. He did not belong to or revive a separate independent tradition already existing alongside Catholicism.

But in the case of the Mahayana, there was already a living tradition, existing alongside the Hinayana, to which [the great figures of the Mahayana] already belonged and which they brought into greater prominence through their expositions and so on.<sup>29</sup>

The Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana then were the three main trends in the unfoldment of these latent tendencies within Archaic Buddhism, each of which successively enjoyed a period of roughly 500 years of overall dominance. Sangharakshita has given comprehensive characterisations of these trends - although inevitably such general descriptions give rise to many exceptions. The Hinayana unfolded the ethical dimension of the Buddha's teaching through its emphasis on monastic life. It also elaborated his psychological teachings by systematically classifying mental states in the *Abhidharma* literature. The Mahayana, building on traditions going back to the Buddha, brought out the devotional side of spiritual life, through its worship of the stupas or reliquaries of the Buddha and through the cults of the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. On the doctrinal side, it elaborated the metaphysical implications of the Dharma. Finally, the Vajrayana took the imaginative and mythic aspects of the original teaching and, based on Mahayana metaphysics, developed a language of ritual and symbol. Thus Sangharakshita sees each *yana* as unfolding elements germinal in the original teaching.

The process of unfoldment was not, of course, as tidy and self-conscious as this description suggests. All the tendencies were present from the beginning.

One can't separate the *yanas* completely. Even though one was dominant, the other was quite effectively present nonetheless. While the Hinayana was *formulated* before the Mahayana, during the 500-year period when the Hinayana was mainly dominant the Mahayana was present as a purely spiritual transmission.<sup>30</sup>

The spirit of those latent tendencies within the original teaching was kept alive among certain groups of disciples and their successors. Under particular circumstances, the tendencies were gradually made explicit in texts, doctrines, and practices, to which later the generic terms 'Mahayana' or 'Vajrayana' would be applied. But these were not, in the early stages of their evolution, seen as completely separate and isolated from the more highly formulated Hinayana teachings and practices. As each successive trend became explicit, it did so alongside and in relation to the trend or trends that had emerged before it. Chinese pilgrims to India reported

that Mahayana and Hinayana monks lived side by side in the same *vihara*. The only difference between them was that the Mahayana monks studied the Mahayana *sutras* and worshipped the Bodhisattvas in addition to all the other things that the Hinayana *bhikkhus* were doing.<sup>31</sup>

Vajrayana was also practised in the great monastic universities and its devotees were often, perhaps usually, monks ordained in the Hinayana ordination lineages and studying the Mahayana *sutras*.

Buddhism had died out in India by the fourteenth century. However, it had, by then, been dispersed throughout Asia. The forms of Buddhism that have survived to the present are each based on one or more aspects of Indian Buddhism, further developed within their new setting. There are three major geographical groupings of these surviving historical forms of Buddhism:

These are South-east Asian Buddhism, which is found in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand, as well as in Cambodia and Laos; Sino-Japanese Buddhism, which exists not only in China and Japan but also in Korea and Vietnam; and Tibetan Buddhism, which from the Land of Snows spreads into Mongolia, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Ladakh. In terms of the three *yanas* South-east Asian Buddhism belongs to the Hinayana. Sino-Japanese Buddhism to the combined Hinayana and Mahayana, with the latter predominating, especially in Japan, while Tibetan Buddhism belongs equally to the Hinayana, the Mahayana, and the Vajrayana, with each succeeding *yana* providing the orientation for the preceding one.<sup>32</sup>

## THE YANAS AS POLEMICAL TERMS

The historical usage of the term *yana* is quite value-neutral. It merely identifies three broad trends unfolding in Buddhist history. However, Mahayanists originally evolved the terms 'Hinayana' and 'Mahayana' with a definite evaluative significance. The 'Great Path' was certainly better than the 'Lesser' one. Sangharakshita considers that this polemical usage of the *yanas* must be carefully separated from the historical.

It must not, of course, be forgotten that the Theravadins do not accept the label Hinayana at all. To be fair, it might be more accurate to call the Hinayana a purely literary phenomenon, because the likelihood of meeting an actual Hinayanist [in the polemical sense] in the flesh is slight indeed. The term Hinayana is simply useful for the purpose of referring to the early schools, and even later schools like the Sarvastivadin and Sautrantika, from which the Mahayana schools evidently differed. Used in this way, it should not be understood in any pejorative sense whatsoever.<sup>33</sup>

It is not, however, that Sangharakshita does not think that there was some considerable truth in the historical Mahayana's criticisms of the historical Hinayana. In *A Survey of Buddhism* he argues, perhaps a little sweepingly, that, at the time that the Mahayana was arising, the Hinayana schools had become conservative and literal-minded, scholastic, one-sidedly negative in their conception of *nirvana* and the Way, over-attached to the merely formal aspects of monasticism, and spiritually individualistic in the sense of being unconcerned with the spiritual welfare of others.<sup>34</sup> However, these are not characteristics of the Hinayana as such but of Hinayana schools at a particular stage of development - or perhaps decay. The same criticisms can also be levelled at various Mahayanists or Vajrayanists in certain periods of their history. For instance,

It isn't only the Hinayana that developed a scholasticism. The Mahayana developed a scholasticism. The Vajrayana, too, strange and paradoxical though it may seem, developed a scholasticism of its own. For instance, some at least of the books on the Vajrayana that emanate from Tibetan sources today are highly scholastic. They don't, therefore, give a very adequate feeling for the spirit of the Vajrayana.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that all three historical *yanas* can be seen to degenerate, in certain respects at certain periods, reveals an important dynamic within the historical phenomenon, Buddhism. What commences as genuine and creative spiritual vision gradually ossifies during its transmission through the ages. Sangharakshita distinguishes, in this connection, between 'the Dharma' and 'Buddhism'.

What tends to happen is that the Dharma as a purely spiritual phenomenon crystallizes, with the appearance in the world of a Buddha, into a system of methods and teachings which we call 'Buddhism'.<sup>36</sup>

This crystallisation is, of course, essential if the Dharma is to be communicated to others. The process of crystallisation can be seen in three distinct phases in the evolution of each Buddhist school. First there is the direct and spontaneous affirmation of the Dharma. Then there is a phase of 'tidying up' through philosophical systematisation. Finally, scholasticism ensues.

Each stage, while in one sense a development of the preceding stage, is in another sense a descent from it. While in the first stage the standpoint is intuitive and transcendental, in the second it is philosophic, and in the third merely rational and logical.<sup>37</sup>

The process of crystallisation extends beyond this evolution of the conceptual expressions of the Dharma. Around the teachings there gradually accumulate patterns of behaviour, institutions, artistic expressions - eventually, a whole culture, influencing perhaps large numbers of people. However necessary and helpful this crystallisation is, in the end it will probably become a limitation.

The fact that Buddhism has crystallized in one way - adequate for a certain time and for certain people - tends to prevent a different kind of crystallization in the future. It is as though the options are limited by the original crystallization....

In this way Buddhism itself, as a culture, may sometimes obstruct the attempts of an Enlightened being to spread the Dharma. Buddhism eventually gets so weighed down by its different cultural forms that even the most heroic attempts of the most gifted teachers cannot make headway on behalf of the Dharma against what passes as Buddhism.<sup>38</sup>

Eventually the existing crystallisation must be shattered and a new and more spiritually dynamic pattern established. Sangharakshita sees that the preservation of the basic forms of the original teaching, even after their spirit has been lost, plays its part in helping to revitalise Buddhism. Spiritually gifted individuals, trying to function within Buddhist schools and cultures in their decay, can reconnect with the original spiritual impetus through the words of the Buddha and his Enlightened successors. This is, of course, a point of great relevance to those, like Sangharakshita, trying to rediscover the spark of the Dharma in what are largely the dead embers of oriental Buddhism.

For the purposes of the present discussion, the Mahayana's criticisms of the Hinayana can just as easily be levelled at the Mahayana itself in certain aspects and phases of its history - as well as at the Vajrayana.

The Mahayana's main criticism of the Hinayana was that it was spiritually individualistic. Hinayanists were supposed to be solely concerned with gaining personal freedom from suffering rather than helping others to liberation. This accusation provides the main polemical usage of the term 'Hinayana'. Hinayanists allegedly followed the 'Arahant Ideal', aiming at personal liberation alone. Mahayanists, on the other hand, pursued the 'Bodhisattva Ideal', aiming at the Enlightenment of all sentient beings. But again, this characterisation has no basis in history. We should be very careful to distinguish the *yanas* used to represent the attitudes of certain individuals from the *yanas* as historical phenomena.

I have met *bhikkhus* who are technically Hinayanists [in the historical sense] but who are spending their whole lives in propagating the Dharma just as though they were Bodhisattvas. I've met Tibetan Buddhist monks who didn't care at all about propagating the Dharma. Though technically they were following the three *yanas*, their attitude was 'Hinayanistic' [in the polemical sense].<sup>39</sup>

Sangharakshita has pointed out that, until forced out of their country by the Chinese invasion, the 'Mahayanists' of Tibet showed little concern for those in the West who had not heard the Dharma. Meanwhile, several 'Hinayanists' of South-east Asia began to establish missionary activities in some European and American cities, from quite early in the twentieth century.

## THE YANAS AS STAGES OF THE SPIRITUAL PATH

The third usage of the *yana* model is the one that presents most problems for readers of Sangharakshita's writings. His later thought here is definitely at odds with his earlier. Once he had encountered Tibetan *triyana* Buddhism he adopted its perspective. It was, after all, far more inclusive than the common Theravadin perception of all other teachings and schools as degenerate. Tibetan Buddhism generally sees the three *yanas* as representing the three principal stages of the spiritual path. All three phases of the historical development of Indian Buddhism were transplanted into Tibet and were made sense of in these terms. The scriptures of the Hinayana and Mahayana, and many of those of the Vajrayana, were all seen as preserving the actual words of the historical Buddha. Each set of scriptures was said to embody his teachings to beings at a different level of spiritual experience or capacity. The Hinayana teaches the path of individual salvation to those of limited capacity. Average disciples learn the path of the Bodhisattva from the Mahayana. By means of the Vajrayana superior beings may gain liberation in a single lifetime. Sangharakshita characterises the *yanas* from this perspective rather succinctly:

If one wanted to summarize those three *yanas* seen as the three great main stages of the spiritual path, one could say that the keynote of the Hinayana is renunciation, of the Mahayana is altruism, and of the Vajrayana is transformation. Renunciation in the sense of Going Forth: going forth from the world, going forth from the group. And altruism because for oneself the distinction between self and others has lost at least something of its significance. And then transformation because one sees that spiritual life doesn't involve disowning anything or separating oneself from anything, but simply of transforming one's natural energies of body, speech, and mind into more and more refined forms. This is really the essence of it.<sup>40</sup>

During any individual's spiritual career, taking place over many lifetimes, all three stages must be traversed. Since these stages in spiritual life were identified with the historical phases of Buddhist development, as Sangharakshita puts it in an early work,

Just as the intra-uterine development of the individual recapitulates the development of the race, so before he can issue from the womb of ignorance, and be born into the World of Enlightenment, the student of the Dharma must recapitulate in his spiritual life the history of Buddhism.<sup>41</sup>

As we see in this passage just quoted, Sangharakshita has incorporated a modified version of this Tibetan *triyana* view into much of his work. In particular, *A Survey of Buddhism* (1957) and his lecture series on 'Aspects of the Bodhisattva Ideal' (1969) and 'Creative Symbols of the Tantric Path to Enlightenment' (1972) speak this language. However, he has since come to the conclusion that the three *yanas* cannot be seen as a spiritual sequence.

Clearly there are deeper and deeper levels of the spiritual path. However, we can't really equate them with the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana in the traditional Tibetan sense.<sup>42</sup>

Sangharakshita values all three historical *yanas* equally. Each is largely the elaboration of an aspect or aspects of the original teaching and represents a particular emphasis. Teachings that relate to the deepest levels of the path can be found in all three *yanas*.

The Tibetan schematisation, inherited from the late Pala dynasty Buddhism of north-eastern India, enshrines the way in which Indian Buddhists had coped with the evolution of doctrine. Sangharakshita points out that in ancient India, as in the European Dark and Middle Ages, there was little idea of historical development. The past was largely seen as exactly like the present. Buddhists at any period would have thought of themselves as living the same life and following the same teachings as disciples had done in the time of the Buddha himself. This determined the way in which they coped with the Buddhism they inherited.

We have already seen that there is a tendency for original spiritual vitality to be lost as its crystallisations harden around it. But to the Indian Buddhists of the time those crystallisations actually were the teachings of the Buddha. Having no idea of historical development, they could not reject them nor could they correct them, so they created what amounts to a myth. They saw the Buddha as having taught everything that had come down to them - but for the sake of beings of lesser capacity. The more spiritually vital message they considered missing from what they inherited they then presented as the Buddha's further revelation for beings of superior spiritual attainment.

Sangharakshita sees an example of this process in the *White Lotus Sutra*, an important Mahayana text. In the *Sutra*, the Buddha is presented as teaching that the three paths of early Buddhism (not here the three *yanas* we have been dealing with) were really one. Here we must briefly recount a little doctrinal history, since it illustrates an important general historical dynamic. Originally, the Buddha's attainment of Enlightenment was considered exactly the same as that of his Enlightened disciples, who were known as *arahants*. They only differed in that the Buddha had gained Enlightenment without any help from a teacher, while the *arahants* had done so in his footsteps. The content of their Enlightened experience was, however, exactly the same as his. Over the centuries this view was lost. The idea gradually arose that the Buddha was much more developed than the *arahants*. So there came to be a choice. One could aim to become either a Buddha or an *arahant*. A third, intermediate, category was added, the *pratyekabuddha*. The paths to becoming a Buddha, an *arahant*, and a *pratyekabuddha* were considered real alternatives leading to real alternative spiritual goals. Actually, they simply represented scholastic misreadings of the original teachings.

By the time the *White Lotus Sutra* had emerged, the original teaching of the Buddha, as one may call it, had shrunk at the hands of some people and arahantship had become a rather individualistic sort of goal. Whoever composed the *White Lotus Sutra* wanted to correct that development, but didn't understand that there had been some sort of historical development. They couldn't say, 'Look, this is not what the Buddha taught historically,' so they created a myth to explain the matter. They presented the Buddha as giving this further teaching that all the paths coalesced and that in reality there was only one path for all.<sup>43</sup>

In this way there came to be a 'stack' of teachings, each one correcting the degeneracy of the preceding by means of the myth of the Buddha giving further and higher teachings.

In Tibetan Buddhist schools the path of the three *yanas* is even further subdivided, in different ways by different schools. Some Chinese and Japanese masters similarly arranged the teachings in complex sequences. Sangharakshita uses the term 'ultra-ism' to describe the phenomenon of continuously adding further stages.

A certain name is applied to the ultimate stage. But, after a while, this term comes to be taken rather literally and therefore comes to mean something less than it meant originally. So you now have to go beyond it with another term that indicates what the first term meant before its meaning became debased. You see this with the word *arahant*. In the Pali texts [belonging to the earliest, Hinayana phase] *arahant* refers to one who has realized the highest truth by following the teaching of the Buddha. But in the Mahayana *sutras*, because the whole notion of the *arahant* had become rather debased, you needed something that went beyond that. In this way there arose the Mahayana conception of the Bodhisattva and the supreme Buddha.<sup>44</sup>

Sangharakshita considers that Western Buddhists cannot accept these traditional schematisations of the teachings. For a start, they have no basis in history since we know that the Buddha did not literally teach many of the later doctrines attributed to him. We can also see that the different schools do not fit neatly into the classificatory schema. For instance, there are teachings in the Pali Canon, supposedly belonging to the Hinayana, that are clearly directed to individuals at a very high level of attainment. At the same time, some teachings found in the 'higher' *yanas* of the Tibetan systems are actually quite elementary: for instance, Sangharakshita considers that some of the practices in the *anuyoga-tantra* of the Nyingmapa are probably merely Indian hatha yoga exercises. Again, he says of *Dzogchen*, which is for the Nyingmapa the very highest stage of spiritual practice,

If one looks at the actual material it seems to boil down to a quite simple practice of mindfulness.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, he says of some teachings in the *anuttarayoga-tantra*, the summit of some Tibetan systems, that they are not really Buddhist at all, but rather unassimilated Hinduism. Finally, these schemata present another difficulty. They were meant to comprehend all aspects of the Buddhist tradition. However, they only account for what schools and teachings were known to the systematisers - which was limited to what had at that time been transmitted to their country from India. Modern Buddhists are faced with the entire range of Buddhist schools, ancient and modern. Since several schools have their own classificatory systems, not only in Tibetan Buddhism but in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism too, there is a problem of reconciling the different systems. This would prove extremely complex, perhaps impossible, and would be of doubtful spiritual value were it achieved.

It is better, Sangharakshita says, to set all these systems aside and go back to the original teachings, on top of which the later teachings have been stacked. Since we cannot, with modern historical knowledge, accept the traditional mythic systems, many of the later teachings will be embedded in complex frameworks of ideas in which we can no longer believe. For instance, since we can no longer believe that the arahant represents a real alternative goal, we cannot accept the path of the Bodhisattva as a higher path.

I think it is important to get back to basic principles - back to the simpler, the more easily understandable, more easy to handle. I think the stack has got so high we have just got to go back. Otherwise we have stack upon stack of practices which have superseded one another. So you might as well just drop all the later developments and go back to the original one, which is closer to the Buddha's own times and to the Buddha himself. We can do that on account of our historical perspective, whereas formerly Buddhists couldn't.<sup>46</sup>

One important reason for a return to basics is the avoidance of certain dangers inherent in the hierarchical arrangement of teachings. Inevitably people want to move on to the highest stage, missing out the initial levels. Sangharakshita calls this 'spiritual snobbism' and says that it was as common among Tibetans in India as it now is among Westerners in Europe and America.

In Tibetan Buddhism you are supposed to go through all the *yanas* - the Nyingmapas have nine! Actually, people go through the first few *yanas* very quickly and really only 'practise' the last one!<sup>47</sup>

Taking the *triyana* system literally leads to a serious distortion of spiritual life.

If you are not careful, you end up trying to practise some teaching which is really way beyond you and barely intelligible, not to say even fantastic in the literal sense.<sup>48</sup>

For instance, if one thought that there was a real *arahant* path, one would conceive of the Bodhisattva path as a really higher alternative. One would then tend to neglect the Hinayana teachings associated with the *arahant* path and start trying to practise the Mahayana. This means trying to be a Bodhisattva, aspiring to Enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. For most ordinary practitioners this cannot but be a kind of fantasy. They cannot really think of themselves personally as Bodhisattvas saving all sentient beings. At best this leads to a 'spiritual life' that is nothing but a harmless dream: at worst it leads to inflation and arrogance.

The language of the Bodhisattva Ideal arose, we have seen, as a corrective to a degeneration in the historical tradition. Lacking a historical perspective that would have enabled them to acknowledge that there had been a degeneration, the Mahayanists had to create a myth. They had to accept the shrunken ideal they had inherited, with its individualistic conception of the goal, and present the Buddha as teaching something further. The Bodhisattva Ideal, lofty and inspiring as it is, is not to be taken literally. It is simply meant to reintroduce the altruistic dimension to the Buddhist ideal. If it is taken literally it becomes a trap. Sangharakshita considers it safer and more spiritually efficacious to return to the essential principles of spiritual life embodied in the basic teachings. One needs no higher teachings beyond these. One simply needs to understand them ever more deeply and apply them ever more fully in one's own life.

This return to basic principles does not mean ignoring or discarding later developments. It simply means seeing them in the context of the earlier teachings. Sangharakshita views the entire later Buddhist tradition as having grown out of the Buddha's own teaching - as filling it out, amplifying and elaborating it, but not as superseding it or adding newer and higher stages. Not only does this greatly simplify the task of finding teachings to apply within our own spiritual practice, but it brings us closer to the Buddha. Those Buddhists, notably of Tibet and Japan, who are practising teachings that come from the later stages of the historical evolution of Buddhism are far removed from its origins. In their own cultural context this has not mattered since they have seldom been confronted with the original teachings. The modern practitioner, however, increasingly faces the entire Buddhist tradition and cannot ignore the Buddha and his original teachings. It must be possible to refer one's own practice back to the origins of Buddhism otherwise one will find oneself in a strange position.

It might be rather disconcerting then to read the Pali Canon, and recognize absolutely nothing that you yourself are practising! It is difficult to see your connection, then, with the founder of your religion. So we don't want to be in that position. We have to be familiar with the earlier forms and base ourselves on them, and appreciate the later developments as growing out of those earlier forms.<sup>49</sup>

A common history and doctrine are practical exemplifications of the underlying unity of Buddhism. The most spiritually perspicacious alone will be able to discern the transcendental unity lying behind the extraordinary diversity of historical Buddhism and its present-day representatives. Most will only recognise their identity with other Buddhists because they perform the same practices, follow the same doctrines, and honour the same historical founder.

## TESTING THE TEACHINGS

While the entire Buddhist tradition can be seen in principle as an elaboration or rounding out of aspects of the basic teachings of the Buddha, evaluation is still required. Buddhism went through many twists and turns in its 2,500-year history. As well as many brilliant and spiritually efficacious new elaborations, there were also many degenerations and distortions. We must test individual teachings to see whether they do indeed conduce to the attainment of Enlightenment. This criterion has, however, its limitations: in the end, only the Enlightened can know what conduces to Enlightenment. Indeed, that pragmatic criterion can be used to justify mere heterodoxy and indulgence. Some trends in Buddhist history have tended to emphasise adaptability more than faithfulness to the letter of tradition, and this had led to degeneration and distortion. The Mahayana and Vajrayana have particularly suffered from this tendency.

Eventually, after having flourished in the land of its birth for more than fifteen hundred years, the Mahayana carried liberalism to extremes and exalted the spirit above the letter of the teaching to such an extent that the latter was almost lost sight of and the Dharma deprived, at least on the mundane plane, of its distinctive individuality.<sup>50</sup>

The Buddhism of Nepal and the last Buddhist remnants in Indonesia are, for instance, now indistinguishable from Hinduism except in name alone. The need to constantly find new ways of communicating the Dharma in new contexts must be balanced by a concern to keep alive what the Dharma really is. Teachings and practices must be evaluated in the light of the experience of the Enlightened.

Some guidance is to be found in the scriptures, which provide an important safeguard against excessive liberalism. Although most Buddhists do not blindly rely on the authoritative word of a sacred book, as so many Protestant Christians have done on the Bible, nonetheless the scriptures are an outstanding source of guidance and insight for most Buddhists. Sangharakshita's view of the Buddhist tradition as a whole can equally be applied to the scriptures. These form a vast body of material, for each school has its own canon, in parts overlapping with others and in parts special to it. Collectively, it is an extraordinary spiritual treasury, which by its sheer diversity testifies to the spiritual vitality of the Buddhist tradition. Set down over a period of some thousand years from the time of the Buddha's *parinirvana* or death, much of it cannot be taken as recording the Buddha's actual words. There is however a common core of material found in all the canons, presumably therefore predating the schools' separation from each other. In that core is what we have called 'Basic Buddhism', the nearest we can get to the actual teaching of the Buddha. Even those parts that are later, and therefore less likely to have come directly from the Buddha, are nonetheless for the most part entirely in the spirit of that earlier teaching. They are genuine elaborations of it, exploring themes opened up in the original teaching, unfolding ever more fully each aspect of the Dharma in the way we have already examined above.

Sangharakshita considers that some knowledge of at least some few canonical texts is indispensable to a serious Buddhist practitioner. That study must be firmly based on a thorough acquaintance with the basic teachings as presented in the oldest texts - of which the most accessible to Western students are those found in the Pali Canon. In his teaching, Sangharakshita has strongly emphasised several important scriptures from various traditional sources. He has given lectures and conducted seminars on many major works and has written a comprehensive account of the canonical literature of Buddhism, *The Eternal Legacy*, again giving expression to his vision of the unity of Buddhism.

The scriptures act as a touchstone by which the validity of new developments can be tested. They are after all, to some extent, records of what the Buddha taught, particularly those portions that deal with Basic Buddhism. They therefore provide some contact with the mind of Enlightenment. If some new teaching evolves or an old teaching is elaborated, it should be possible to see whether it is in the spirit of the basic teachings of Buddhism as expressed in the scriptures. In his important essay, *The Meaning of Orthodoxy in Buddhism*, Sangharakshita gives as one definition of Buddhist orthodoxy:

According to, or congruous with, the scriptures common to all schools of Buddhism, especially as expressed in the stereotype formulae such as the Four Noble Truths and the Three Characteristics (*tri-lakshana*), which are found in both the Scriptures which are and the Scriptures which are not common to all schools.<sup>51</sup>

Another criterion is that the teaching should be

of Right Views (*sammadiithika*); hence, adhering to the Dharma of the Buddha as formulated in the formulae such as the Four Noble Truths and the Three Characteristics (*tilakkhana*) without inclining either to the extreme of Eternalism (*sassatavada*) or the extreme of Nihilism (*ucchedavada*).<sup>52</sup>

These criteria ensure that the pragmatic definition of the Dharma as whatever conduces to Enlightenment is not used to give licence to self-indulgence and whim. In order to apply that definition effectively one must know to some extent what Enlightenment is; only then will one be able to tell whether a practice is actually leading towards it. The scriptures and the basic doctrinal formulae, emanating from the

Enlightened mind, offer some means of ascertaining whether the new teaching is genuinely 'the Master's Message' - or *Buddha-sasana*, as it was traditionally termed.

## THE PRINCIPLES OF A NEW BUDDHIST MOVEMENT

Sangharakshita's understanding of the unity of Buddhism and his perspective on the Buddhist tradition found practical application when he came to found the FWBO in 1967. The principles on which it should be formed were by then very clear to him. The first and most basic was that the new movement should help the individuals it consisted of to grow towards Enlightenment. Teachings and practices were taken up because they worked. There was no question of simply continuing unthinkingly any one school or tradition in its existing form. Using the Buddha's pragmatic criteria for recognising the 'Master's Message', Sangharakshita built a body of teachings and practices - still growing and changing - which met the spiritual needs of his disciples. Since he viewed the entire Buddhist tradition as likely to contain valid means to Enlightenment, he could draw from any part of it whatever was appropriate to the present. This was no mere eclecticism, in the sense of a selection according to a preconceived system, rationally deduced. No more was it simply a matter of personal whim or preference. Teachings and practices were incorporated because they answered his disciples' definite spiritual needs.

Clearly it was not possible to take up every teaching of every school of Buddhism. Even within a single school there is far more material available than any individual could ever usefully take advantage of. There had to be a selection - a selection based upon real spiritual needs. Indeed, as Sangharakshita points out,

In selecting doctrinal and practical elements from one or more Eastern Buddhist tradition the FWBO is doing no more, in principle, than individual Eastern Buddhists, or groups of Eastern Buddhists, do in the case of their own particular tradition. A Sinhalese Theravada monk, for example, while in principle accepting the Theravada tradition *in toto*, will not familiarize himself with all the doctrines ... nor will he practise all the forty methods of meditation (*kammatthana*) described in the *Visuddhimagga*.<sup>53</sup>

There was however a clear starting point. Sangharakshita saw the Buddhist tradition as consisting of elaborations and explications of the essential principles contained in the Buddha's original teaching. He therefore drew his main corpus of material from that core of doctrine he called 'Basic Buddhism'. Indeed, he considered that most of his disciples' spiritual needs could be met by their simply practising more and more deeply these fundamental teachings. He enjoined on his disciples the maxim, 'More and more of less and less': that is,

our principle of trying to go more and more deeply into the so-called basic teachings of Buddhism rather than trying to hurry on to teachings which are allegedly more advanced.<sup>54</sup>

The emphasis on the basic teachings also ensured the 'orthodoxy' of the new movement. Any innovations or importations from other sources could be tested against these teachings that embody the Buddha's own expression of the Dharma. Thus, although the FWBO did not adhere to any traditional school of Buddhism, Sangharakshita ensured that it was entirely traditional. It was based upon the Buddha's own Enlightened experience and followed as fully as it could the spirit of his teaching.

The movement he created was a living testimony to the unity of Buddhism. He took inspiration from most Buddhist sources.

As regards meditation, for instance, we teach the 'mindfulness of breathing' and the *metta-bhavana*, the 'development of loving kindness', which are taken from the Theravada tradition. We recite the Sevenfold Puja - which comes from the Indian Mahayana tradition. We chant mantras which come from the Tibetan tradition. And then of course there is our emphasis on the importance of work in the spiritual life, which is a characteristically Zen emphasis.<sup>55</sup>

He was not confined, however, to already existing teachings and practices. The spiritual needs of his disciples drew out aspects of spiritual life not fully explored before.

Naturally, we also have certain emphases which are not to be found in any extant form of Buddhism: for example, our emphasis on Right Livelihood, on Going for Refuge, and on 'more and more of less and less'.<sup>56</sup>

Besides these specifically Buddhist emphases, he took up various non-Buddhist teachings and practices. For instance, he has led study on an Islamic text, *The Duties of Brotherhood in Islam* by Al-Ghazali,<sup>57</sup> which has been a source of great inspiration on the theme of friendship. He has encouraged the practice of T'ai chi ch'uan, hatha yoga, and karate and other martial arts as 'indirect' means of development - 'indirect' in that they work indirectly on the mind to raise the level of consciousness as distinct from meditation, which works directly. Nor have Western art and literature been neglected. Sangharakshita has strongly advocated their appreciation, partly to heighten awareness through aesthetic experience and partly to provide exemplification of Dharmic principles from within Western culture.

While Sangharakshita is determinedly nonsectarian, he is not uncritical of aspects of the Buddhist tradition and its modern representatives. He asserts that a nonsectarian approach that acknowledges the

unity of Buddhism does not imply an unquestioning acceptance of every teaching, practice, and institution called, or calling itself, Buddhist.

It should never be forgotten that, for a preacher of the Dharma, to reveal truth and to dispel falsehood are the positive and negative aspects of one process, and the history of Buddhist thought bears testimony not only to the energy with which the Message of the Master was propagated but also to the vigour with which contradictory doctrines were opposed.<sup>58</sup>

From his early days in India, he has spoken out against what he considered the narrow-minded literalism of the Theravada. Later he saw and pointed out various weaknesses within Tibetan and other forms of Buddhism. He casts a discriminating eye over the modern Buddhist scene, openly drawing attention to what he sees as failings - as well as giving praise where it is due. Sangharakshita considers there to be quite a bit of confusion, and even distortion of the Dharma, in many modern Buddhist groups. He sees it as his duty to point this out, hoping to awaken the confused to their condition and to alert others before they too fall victim.

Naturally, Sangharakshita does not think that the FWBO exhausts the possible forms the Dharma could take in the modern age. The FWBO itself is constantly changing and broadening and other groups will also be exploring other modes of expressing the Dharma. This means that Sangharakshita is open to friendship with any Buddhists who are sincerely trying to live the Buddhist life - although he insists that contact should not be of a merely 'official' kind between representatives of organisations.

As regards the relation of the Order to the rest of the Buddhist world let me simply observe that it is a relation that subsists, essentially, with individuals, and that ... we are happy to extend the hand of spiritual fellowship to all those Buddhists for whom commitment is primary, life-style secondary and who, like us, go for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.<sup>59</sup>

## THE REFUGE TREE

Sangharakshita's relationship to the Buddhist tradition and his commitment to the unity of Buddhism is embodied in an image central to the Order he has founded. In each of the Tibetan Buddhist schools there is a 'Refuge Tree', on which are arranged all the figures that, for that school, embody the principal 'Refuges' or ideals. Sangharakshita has created such a Refuge Tree for the Order, in this way making clear its distinctive emphases and its main influences. This Refuge Tree is incorporated in the 'Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice' undertaken by some members and prospective members of the Western Buddhist Order.

Seated in meditation, one visualises a vast tree, growing up from a rainbow-coloured cloud in the midst of an infinite blue sky. The tree has four branches arranged around a central stem, the branches and central stem each being surmounted by an enormous white lotus blossom. Seated on the central lotus is the Buddha Sakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, from whose transcendental realisation all the various schools have unfolded. He is flanked by two smaller figures, Dipankara and Maitreya, the Buddhas of the past and the future respectively. The three figures together represent the principle of Enlightenment, in which is found the transcendental unity of Buddhism, as transcending time.

On the lotus which branches towards the meditator sits Sangharakshita himself, the founder of the Order, this new expression of the Buddhist tradition. His place here in the tree implies no 'personality cult', but a recognition that he is the link between Order members and the wider tradition. The visualisation of one's own teacher in such settings is quite common in the Tibetan tradition. One sees Sangharakshita surrounded by his own eight teachers who are, in their turn, his links to the tradition: Hermit Chen and Bhikkhu Jagdish Kashyap, Chetel Sangye Dorje, Khachu Rimpoche, Dhardo Rimpoche, Dudjom Rimpoche, Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche, and Dilgo Khyentse Rimpoche.<sup>60</sup> On the lotus to the left are the principal Bodhisattvas: Avalokitesvara, Manjusri, Vajrapani, Tara, and Kshitigarbha.<sup>61</sup> The inclusion of these figures demonstrates the Order's acceptance of the Bodhisattva Ideal in all its aspects and its drawing upon the highest resources of the Imagination. To the right are some of the Buddha's immediate disciples, embodying the basic teachings of Buddhism and the source of their transmission to the present time: Sariputra and Maudgalyayana, the Buddha's two chief disciples, Ananda, his friend and attendant for much of his life, Mahakasyapa, who came to lead the Order after his death, and Dhammadinna, a nun of brilliant spiritual gifts whose insight into the 'cyclic' and 'spiral' nature of conditionality has had an important effect on Sangharakshita's thinking. On the lotus behind the central figure are piled high the scriptures of all the schools of Buddhism.

Above the head of Sakyamuni sit rows of teachers from all the main Buddhist schools. At the top are Nagarjuna and Asanga, the founders of the Madhyamaka and Yogacara respectively, the two main philosophical currents in Buddhism outside the Hinayana. Below them are the Indian teachers: Santideva,



the author of the *Bodhicaryavatara*, a text much studied in the Order and the source of its principal devotional ceremony, Buddhaghosha, the great teacher of the Theravada School, and Vasubandhu, brother of Asanga and co-founder of the Yogacara. Next come the Tibetans: Milarepa, the 'poet-saint' from whom derives the Kagyupa, Atisa, an Indian teacher who effectively reintroduced the Dharma to Tibet, Padmasambhava, the Indian guru who is said to have first established Buddhism there and is thus revered as the founder of the Nyingmapa School, and Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelugpa School. Then appear the Chinese teachers: Chih-i, the founder of the T'ien-t'ai, Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch of the Ch'an School, and Hsuan-tsang, the translator, scholar, and pilgrim, who travelled extensively in India in search of texts. Finally come the Japanese teachers: Dogen, the founder of the Soto Zen School, Hakuin, one of the principal figures in Rinzaï Zen, Kukai, the founder of the Shingon Esoteric School, and Shinran, the founder of the True Pure Land School in Japan.

Above these teachers of the past are the five Jinas - the archetypal Buddhas of the five directions, embodying the principal aspects of transcendental Wisdom. The whole array of figures is surmounted by Vajrasattva, the embodiment of the Dharma in its complete and wordless purity, the transcendental unity of Buddhism.

Having visualised this image, one rises and, keeping the Tree before one in one's mind's eye, prostrates full-length before it again and again, saying 'To the Buddha for Refuge I go; to the Dharma for Refuge I go; to the Sangha for Refuge I go,' committing oneself fully to the ideal of Enlightenment through the Buddhist tradition as re-expressed by Sangharakshita for this modern age.

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