

General Introduction to Sangharakshita's Seminars

Hidden Treasure

From the mid-seventies through to the mid-eighties, Urgyen Sangharakshita led many seminars on a wide range of texts for invited groups of [Order members](#) and [Mitrās](#). These seminars were highly formative for the FWBO/Triratna as Sangharakshita opened up for the still very young community what it might mean to live a life in the Dharma.

The seminars were all recorded and later transcribed. Some of these transcriptions have been carefully checked and edited and are [now available in book form](#). However, a great deal of material has so far remained unchecked and unedited and we want to make it available to people who wish to deepen their understanding of Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma.

How should one approach reading a seminar transcription from so long ago? Maybe the first thing to do is to vividly imagine the context. What year is it? Who is present? We then step into a world in which Sangharakshita is directly communicating the Dharma. Sometimes he is explaining a text, at other times he is responding to questions and we can see how the emergence of Dharma teachings in this context was a collaborative process, the teaching being drawn out by the questions people asked. Sometimes those questions were less to do with the text and arose more from the contemporary situation of the emerging new Buddhist movement.

Reading through the transcripts can be a bit like working as a miner, sifting through silt and rubble to find the real jewels. Sometimes the discussion is just a bit dull. Sometimes we see Sangharakshita trying to engage with the confusion of ideas many of us brought to Buddhism, confusion which can be reflected in the texts themselves. With brilliant flashes of clarity and understanding, we see him giving teachings in response that have since become an integral part of the Triratna Dharma landscape.

Not all Sangharakshita's ways of seeing things are palatable to modern tastes and outlook. At times some of the views captured in these transcripts express attitudes and ideas [Triratna has acknowledged as unhelpful](#) and which form no part of our teaching today. In encountering all of the ideas contained in over seventeen million words of Dharma investigation and exchange, we are each challenged to test what is said in the fire of our own practice and experience; and to talk over 'knotty points' with friends and teachers to better clarify our own understanding and, where we wish to, to decide to disagree.

We hope that over the next years more seminars will be checked and edited for a wider readership. In the meantime we hope that what you find here will inspire, stimulate, encourage - and challenge you in your practice of the Dharma and in understanding more deeply the approach of Urgyen Sangharakshita.

Sangharakshita's Literary Executors and the Adhithana Dharma Team

The Venerable Sangharakshita
Question and Answer Session
held on the Amitabha Sadhana Retreat at Water Hall
in December 1991

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Transcriber's note: No voice print was taken at the beginning of the session, therefore I have not been able to identify many of the speakers.

Sangharakshita: quite simple and straightforward. Others are rather lengthy and complex and I don't think I can sort all of them out in this particular kind of format. They need really to be dealt with in the course of some future event. [Laughter] That's not a bad thing. The questions are all quite serious and deal with quite important topics, so sooner or later I shall be glad to incorporate in some paper written for the Order's benefit, glad to incorporate points arising out some of the questions that have been asked. I'll touch on some of those questions nonetheless briefly, at least in part, but I think I'm going to start off with a few nice easy questions, or at least clear and simple questions centring mainly on the sadhana that we've been doing.

First of all there's something of a quite general nature relating to Amitabha and Amitayus.

The questions says,

Can you say something about the differences between Amitabha and Amitayus, and also about the relationship between them?

I think this is touched upon in another of the questions. Yes there's another question here which says,

I understand that an effective distinction between Amitabha and Amitayus as separate Buddha forms is only made in Tibetan Buddhism. How do you see the difference in quality and essence between the two forms?

I think the first thing to be said here is that we have to be careful of literalism, because in a sense there's only one Buddha, or in a sense again even not one because number is only a mental construct one could say, so that there's neither one Buddha nor many Buddhas, but for practical purposes, as it were we postulate, we visualise, we experience, many Buddhas. Or one might even say for practical purposes there are many Buddhas.

But I think one has to be quite careful not to take that too literally, in the sense that one has to try to feel one's way or find one's way behind the names to what the names represent, whatever the names happen to be. Do you see what I mean? I did speak about this some time ago, maybe a few years ago, in connection with the Greek divinities, just to make it, as it were, easier and more familiar. For instance we have the Greek god Apollo, so it's not so much a question of asking ourselves well what does Apollo mean or what does Apollo represent or what does Zeus represent. This point I think incidentally is made by (*cough obscures name!*) somewhere, but we have to try to think independently of any names of a particular kind of reality

or a particular aspect of reality and then consider what name is appropriate for that. Not try to go so much from the name to the reality but try to get the reality in view and then see what the name is, then see what it is called. So I think it's not primarily a matter of saying well what's the difference between Amitabha and Amitayus, but trying to get into view what those names represents. Leaving aside even the names, and considering certain basics of human experience.

Maybe that isn't very clear so perhaps I'll illustrate a little bit. It's well known in philosophy that we experience things through two great media. Let's say experience material things, experience mundane things through two great media. So what are those? Can anybody think?

_____: Space.

S: Space.

_____: Time

S: And time, yes. So we cannot but conceive of ultimate reality except in terms of categories with which we are familiar from our own experience. So when we think of ultimate reality let's say in terms of space - some Buddhist traditions actually do think of reality in terms of space - space is an *Asamskrtadhatu*, it's an incomposite. But, leaving this aside, if we think in terms of space, what is it that fills space, what occupies space?

_____: Form.

S: Yes.

_____: Light.

S: Light, yes, because light illumines form. If light isn't there you don't perceive a form. So it's as though light is an absolutely primary category of thought. And in fact we find such expressions as enlightenment, to see things, to throw light on a subject. We use that expression metaphorically. So therefore we may say that to think in terms of light, to think of reality, ultimate reality, in terms of infinite light, is a natural human way of thinking. So in a sense there has to be a Buddha of infinite light, inasmuch as we cannot but perceive ultimate reality in the form of that particular category. Similarly with life. What is it, as it were, that fills time? What is it that it prolonged in time? It's life. The Sanskrit word here - *Ayur* - doesn't just mean life in the English sense, it's more like length of life. So you have a Buddhahood conceived of under the form of time, as consisting in infinite life. So therefore, inasmuch as space and time are interconnected. In fact you've been told in this century that time is a dimension of space itself, haven't we? Since these two are inseparable, light and life are inseparable, Amitabha and Amitayus are inseparable.

So you see how one arrives at this particular way of looking at Buddhahood. Form was mentioned just now. Yes there is analogy with form. You could say that Amitabha represents the archetype of *Sunyata* and Amitayus represents the archetype of *Rupa*. Or you could also say Amitabha represents wisdom and Amitayus represents compassion. These two of course being inseparable. So you can see that even though you can have, as it were, separate Buddha forms, iconographically and as it were mythologically, for Amitabha and Amitayus, you mustn't think of them really, in the ultimate sense, as separate, as it were, personalities. In the sutra we saw that Amitabha and Amitayus are just alternative names for the same Buddha. Very true. But you can also think of two Buddhas provided you understand the situation correctly you can split those two Buddhas up into any number of Buddhas representing particular individual aspects if you so wish. But I think it is helpful if we think out, as it were, the philosophical basis of the whole thing, philosophical basis of this way of looking at Buddhas, these two Buddhas in particular, before we start asking ourselves, well what those Buddhas mean and what those Buddhas represent. Do you see what I mean? As I said at the beginning, go from the reality to the name, rather than trying to get at the reality from the name. I have read somewhere - I'm sure Suvajra's read it too - that in the Tibetan tradition one represents the *Dharmakaya* and one represents the *Sambhogakaya*. I'm afraid I can never remember which is which.

Suvajra: Amitabha represents the *Dharmakaya*.

S: Yes, that's what one would have expected in the light of this explanation.

Suvajra: Amitayus with his princely robes represents the *Sambhogakaya*.

S: Because he represents the principle of life, the principle of compassion, therefore it is more natural, so to speak, that he should be expansive, that he should manifest in the world.

Any supplementary on all that. I've expressed it quite generally and crudely. Perhaps sometime I shall incorporate these sort

of reflections in a paper.

Suvajra: One other place I read in the Tibetan tradition that regard Amitabha as the essence and Amitayus as the action. Both the same Buddha but one in the essence form and the other in the action form. I don't know what the Tibetan...

S: In the sense of *guna*? Which is usually translated as 'quality'. Of course in the Nyingmapa tradition, Amitabha is the *Dharmakaya* and the thousand armed Avalokitesvara is the *Sambhogakaya*, and Padmasambhava, of course is the *Nirmanakaya*. Again it's a different approach, a different system. I'm afraid one has to get used to these shifting permutations. You can't tie anything down, not as regards nomenclature. That's why it's very important to try to get some glimpse of the underlying realities. Then you're not bothered or confused so much by these differences of language.

And of course in the *Saddharmapundarika* Sutra there is a chapter called 'The Revelation of the Buddhas of Infinite Life', which clearly ties up with the conception of the Buddha or Buddhahood as infinite life.

Suvajra: It's interesting you mentioned Apollo, because Subhuti quoted Ruskin a few months ago with regard to Apollo where people had been saying in the last century that they thought they knew what Apollo was, having gone to the British Museum, and he said it's nonsense, Apollo is a spiritual principle, not a statue.

S: Ah, who quoted that?

Suvajra: Subhuti quoted Ruskin on that.

S: Ah yes. Incidentally Ruskin's writings on mythology, Greek mythology, are very very interesting and illuminating. He worked relatively late in life but he had some quite profound things to say and this seems to have been one of them.

All right then let's go on from there. Another somewhat connected two questions from two different people. First of all,

I'd like to know a little more about the so-called 'new' Amitabha sadhana which is based on your own visionary experience. To me the form seems to have moved to something a little more active from the stable, symmetrical 'dhyana' mudra form to an asymmetrical one where Amitabha holds the lotus up in an almost dramatic way. Could you say a little more about this please? What might be the significance of this for you/us/the movement?

And then there's another question:

Do you have anything to say about the traditional 'dhyana' mudra and Amitabha holding up the lotus?

You've suggested that we reflect on this. Well, it does seem that Amitabha holding up the lotus is not completely untraditional, because I happened to notice only just today that someone had sent Paramartha a postcard, a picture postcard from Kathmandu with.... (*murmurs as Bhante, presumably, hold up the postcard*) Has anyone seen it before, because I haven't. I hadn't seen it before. So it does seem that there's some parallel with tradition. [Laughter] I certainly hadn't seen any Amitabha figure represented in this way. I did - I think there is another question somewhere about whether I was acquainted with the figure of Amitabha before I had that experience, and yes I had seen the figure of Amitabha in a book on Buddhism, but it hadn't registered particularly, not consciously anyway. But it is rather interesting to find that he's this quite elegant Buddha holding that lotus flower in just the same way. It's not quite the same lotus flower that I saw because, well first of all it's not a brilliant red, which is how I saw it, and also it's rather stylised.

Incidentally the lotus in Indian Buddhist art and Far Eastern Buddhist art is very stylised. It doesn't really look like a lotus at all. Someone by the way has asked a question - another question - about whether one might substitute the rose for the lotus, the rose being apparently more a part of our own culture. But then again the rose in our art has been stylised. And the lotus is not completely unknown to Western culture. *'Lotos'* is a Greek word and the Egyptians of course had lotuses, you find plenty of lotuses, but I think not exactly the Indian lotus, more like a water lily, in Egyptian art. But I think the main idea is that you have a multi foliate flower, that is a flower with many petals radiating from the centre in layers. I think that is the basic idea of lotus or rose. In the case of the lotus, from the point of view of symbolism it has an advantage inasmuch as it grows out of the mud. Of course the rose grows out of the earth. But earth, at least in emotional terms, is not quite the same thing as mud, is not quite the same thing as muck. [Laughter] So to speak of the lotus growing out of the mud doesn't have quite the same sort of connotation as speaking of the rose growing out of the earth, if you see what I mean.

So if you opt for rose rather than lotus you'll have to give up mud, [Laughter] and you'll have to adopt earth, because so far

as I know roses don't grow well in mud.

Suvajra: You have lots of dung!

S: Dung! [Laughter] Perhaps you could have not lotuses growing out of the mud but roses growing out of lung. [Laughter]

Ananda: You do have to renew them every year.

S: Yes, but it's not just dung, is it. [Laughter] There's a mixture. But anyway I'll leave you to sort that one out among yourselves and you can have perhaps a comparative discussion on the respective merits of mud and dung. The underlying principle of course is the same.

But to come back to this first question, yes it's interesting that it's from a stable, symmetrical form to an asymmetrical form, but it doesn't exactly look unstable, does it. Not here. Would you say it was dramatic?

_____: Almost.

S: Almost. But I'm also asked,

'Could you say a little more about this please. Why, or rather what, might be the significance of this for you/us/the movement?'

I can't say that at the time I attached any particular significance to the fact that Amitabha was holding up the lotus. I probably didn't realise that it wasn't very usual, probably not, because I just didn't know enough about Buddhist iconography then. And as far as I remember I didn't reflect on whether it had any particular significance. I'm not even sure whether at that stage, and this did happen when I was, what 23, I'm not even sure whether I'd heard the famous story about the Buddha holding up the golden flower to Mahakashyapa. It certainly didn't figure very much for me then, so I doubt if there was that sort of association. But I suppose one just has to reflect and see what meaning one can give it. It's not necessarily that it has a cut and dried meaning which has to be pinned down. So what does it represent? Has anyone got any ideas or has anyone had any reflection?

_____: I was struck by the fact that it is a lotus that he's holding which is exactly the same as what the figure's sitting on, so it's as if he's taking part of that and demonstrating that, as opposed to holding a book of scriptures or a sword or any other iconographic...

S: This was something that I noticed, just in visual terms, at the time, that the red lotus which was being held up, the flower, was the exact replica on a smaller scale, of the red lotus on which the Buddha was sitting. That was certainly very noticeable, though I didn't work out any particular significance for it. The one is of course much smaller than the other, and no doubt that has a significance.

_____: But it feels as if the figure is saying 'look more closely'.

_____: I'd find it more challenging. Holding the lotus upright. Very challenging.

Amoghavajra: It a sort of statement.

S: Yes it's as if to say that the lotus on which I'm sitting - this is just what occurs to me now - the lotus on which I am sitting, is not just for me. It's also for you. (*General agreement*) So even though you start off with your lotus on a very much smaller scale, it's the same lotus, it's the same red lotus. It's not just for me, even though mine is fully blown and yours is very small, even though you're able to accept for the time being just a very small lotus flower. But, yes certainly I noticed that parallelism between the two.

And regarding this particular figure, it's almost as though the lotus is being held up but it's like this, it's not like this, and also in my vision it was like this. It's as though well it's here for you, it's not that I'm giving it to you, it's here for you. It's for you to come forward as it were and take it. It's more like that. It's displaying it rather than giving it. It's not being thrust on you, not like those people in India and also sometimes other countries, where they give you a flower and you think they've given it to you and five minutes later they come round to collect the money for it. So it's just being held up for your contemplation, possibly for your acceptance. Hopefully for your acceptance. I think that comes out quite well in this particular figure.

_____: Was that how it was held in the vision you had?

S: Yes, though I must say the elbow in my particular case was much more up. I don't know whether that has any significance. Here the elbow is kept fairly close to the Buddha's side but I saw it more like that, not so much like that. [Loud Laughter] significance. Perhaps the way I saw it was, as this questioner suggests, a wee bit more dramatic. Maybe that was just my Western temperament. I don't know.

Anyway any further point about that or can we just leave that? It's actually a quite fine thangka.

_____: Just a question about the detail. I was thinking about this today. In the vision itself what were the robes like. You say embroidered with gold....?

S: I can't remember now any particular pattern except the red brown with a gold patterning. You do quite often see that in Tibetan thangkas. It could be that at the time I did see a particular pattern but I can't remember now. And that gold patterning would make the robe glitter as it were.

_____: What for you would be the symbolism of the lotus? What does it say?

S: I think the traditional Buddhist significance. It represents growth, especially growth from the mud. It represents unfoldment, it represents beauty, represents receptivity. The colour of the lotus is important. The red lotus would also suggest warmth and love. There's a white lotus, there's a blue lotus. The actual lotus, the botanical lotus, is white tinged with pink, especially tinged with pink at the edges of the petals, especially towards the top, and it's about so big, and it has not very many petals actually. Not as many as a water lily. It has big, almost floppy petals, and when it's a bit old they sort of spread out, but they look a bit floppy. They're not arranged in neat tiers as in Buddhist art. They are not, as it were, layered nicely. But it is a beautiful plant, but quite substantial looking, as it were.

It has these big seed pods which are very impressive, about so big, of this diameter, and of course you have the lotus seeds in the pod, and the blunt end of the seed is conterminous with the flat top of the pod. There's quite a lot of seeds and they are very tasty even. Have them fried. I remember! [Laughter] I used to travel down to Nagpur via Jagulpur(?). The train went round in a great loop. I used to get out at one station and take a bus across the loop, if you see what I mean, and halfway there, it was about a hundred miles or so, halfway there was a stop for a cup of tea, and at that stop, it was only a village, there was an enormous lotus pond full of these lotuses and lots of little stalls with people selling these fried lotus seeds, which are also quite nice fresh and raw, and I remember that very well. I often used to stop there, not just to have a cup of tea but to have some lotus seeds! They were about so big, they were quite big. They are real nuts. I won't say anything more about those [Laughter] but that's one of the associations that the lotus has for me. The lotus pond, the lotus seed as well as the flower.

But the lotus of Buddhist art doesn't really resemble an actual lotus very much. Someone gave me a quite beautiful book of paintings of flowers and that does contain a very beautiful representation of the actual botanical lotus. I believe that there's only one species of lotus. Some flowers have got dozens, hundreds, even thousands, of species. I believe the lotus consists of only one species, but I might have got it a little wrong. I'd have to check that, possibly three but I think more likely just one. There are not many species of water lilies either, whereas there are several thousand species, for instance, of things like marigolds and orchids and so on. But I don't know whether that's suggestive of anything. That in botanical terms the lotus is quite a rare kind of plant.

_____: Could you say the open red lotus is an open heart and therefore the bodhicitta?

S: You could. In popular Indian speech they also refer to the lotus of the heart. I believe in the Upanishads this expression occurs. And of course the various chakras, as we call them, the wheels, which are strung out along the median nerve, about which there will be a question, are represented as lotuses with different numbers of petals, and at the top of course there's the thousand petalled lotus. So there are all these sort of associations.

_____: Could you look upon the red lotus as the bodhicitta?

S: You could. It's not that this is the meaning and that's *(a few words unclear)*. You can give it any meaning you please. Within reason, as it were, or within no reason! [Laughter] You could certainly look at it in that way. The lotus of the heart, yes.

Yes, since I've mentioned the median nerve there's a couple of questions.

Where is the median nerve? Where does it start and where does it end?

Different texts say different things about it, but it seems to me that according to the most authentic tradition, and certainly according to the Tibetan tradition, the median nerve, the *Abhadhuti* as it's called in the Vajrayana, is not a nerve within the

physical body. It's as though there is a subtle counterpart of this physical body and this subtle body has its own, as it were, nervous system, and the *Abhadhuti* in that corresponds to the median nerve in the spinal column I suppose in the physical body. And according to Tibetan tradition - I remember this is one of the things that Dilgo Khyentse explained to me - in Tibetan tradition, is visualised as being of the thickness of one's finger. I think one's ring finger, and hollow. More like a tube. That is how it is visualised. It's usually visualised as green in colour as far as I remember, and it extends through the subtle body in the same way that the median nerve or the spinal column extends through the physical body, and it's along this median nerve, this *Abhadhuti*, that the lotuses are strung out, which are not plexuses in the physiological sense, but as it were their subtle counterpart. Whether there is a real correspondence between the two I'm not sure. It doesn't really come out clearly from the texts, but it does seem that if you do the meditations involving the visualisation of the median nerve, it doesn't matter if you think that it is in the physical body. It doesn't seem to make any difference to the actual practice. The main thing is that you visualise it. If mentally you locate it in the actual physical body, it doesn't seem actually to matter. The main thing is you should visualise it in a particular way according to the nature of the practice, and similarly for the chakras, the lotuses, strung out along that.

Some people do say though that when they visualise the median nerve and the chakras they do have corresponding experiences in the physical body itself. This would go to suggest I suppose that even if there is a subtle body corresponding to the physical one, there is a certain correspondence between them and that they are interconnected. So the median nerve is supposed to come out, as it were, at a point corresponding to the top of the head. There must be a correspondence between the two - this just occurs to me - because in the transference of consciousness practice sometimes there is an actual hollow created at the top of the head and a liquid starts emerging from that. I've heard about this from several people who have had the actual experience or have known people who have had the actual experience. So again that does suggest a sort of correlation or interaction between the subtle physical body and the gross physical body. We probably don't really understand all that as yet.

Then

The red coloured letters of the mantra that emanate from Amitabha travel down the median nerve and then what happens to them?

They're, as it were, received into the heart, the heart centre, and it's as though there they become transformed from form into sound and then you start repeating the *Om Amideva Hrih*. If you like you can also visualise them as actually in the heart but that's might be rather difficult to do at the same time. The suggestion is that having been received in the heart you start hearing them. In some practices you not only visualise the letters of the mantra but you also hear the sound made by those visible letters as they vibrate, as it were. They vibrate with their own sound. For instance *Hum* would be vibrating and producing the actual sound *Hum*, because you don't just see *Hum* written as a written mantra, but you actually hear it as the written letter vibrates.

_____: Bhante, is that an actual translation - median nerve - of *Abhadhuti*?

S: No, it isn't really *Abhadhuti* is a symbolical expression. It's part of the symbolical language of the Vajrayana. *Abhadhuti* - an *Abhadhuta* - it's feminine gender by the way - but *Abhadhuta* is a type of sadhu who wanders free from place to place without any ties or attachments. The term isn't used much in Buddhism generally and it's used, as far as I remember, only in the context of the Vajrayana, and in that special sense, and in the feminine gender. But *Abhadhuta* is a well known figure in popular Hinduism. There is an *Abhadhutagita* in Hinduism, the song of the *Abhadhuta*. He's more than a sanyassin in a way. He's not even a sanyassin, can't be categorised. Very often he wanders about without any clothes. So it's a symbol of complete freedom and non attachment and non possession. So you have to work out the connection for yourself as it were.

_____: I was asking more as a matter of terminology because I know anatomically there is a median nerve elsewhere. I actually found it quite confusing to be talking about median nerves and I would think about my arm and not my spine, and I don't think ever in anatomy we talk about the median nerve, literally we talk about the spinal column.

S: Well in books on yoga and the Vajrayana the expression Median nerve is used for the *Abhadhuti* but no doubt that is quite confusing and perhaps we should just say *Abhadhuti*. The Hindu term is *Susshuma*(?)

[End of side one side two]

Perhaps we can reflect on the fact that that channel is called the *Abhadhuti* at all. It's also sometimes described as resembling a hollow bamboo the thickness of one's finger. I did once hear quite a lot about these things. I'm afraid I'm beginning to forget quite a lot of the things that I did hear or did read in India, but there is quite a literature about the *Abhadhuta* which, though Hindu have at least thrown some light on the general significance of that particular term.

Could you say a few words about your vision of Amitabha? Did this occur before you

had come across the figure?

I've already answered that part of the question. I was slightly familiar with the figure from books on Buddhism, though it didn't mean anything in particular to me at the time.

If so, have you had any reflections on this vision, i.e. the mechanics, so to speak? Have you had any reflections on visions in general?

I'm not quite sure what 'mechanics' means here. The question is unsigned but... [Laughter] if the perpetrator would like to speak up. Mechanics?

Shantiprabha: I was just wondering.... [Laughter] if you hadn't come across the figure before had you had any reflections on why that vision should occur and why you should see that particular figure?

S: I have of course wondered from time to time. In a sense I don't know. I took it at the time, as I've mentioned in *The Thousand Petalled Lotus*, to mean that I should go to North India and take formal ordination as a sramanera. That's the significance it had for me at that time, because I had originally thought that before taking any Buddhist ordination I'd see if I could live the life for a couple of years, because in those days I took the bhikkhu life literally quite seriously, and I wanted to find out whether I could lead that life before I became ordained. In those days I was young, naïve and idealistic. [Laughter] Before I say that now I'm old, naïve and still idealistic! [Laughter] Though the idealism has suffered, I won't say a few dents, [Laughter] but it wouldn't have been surprising if it had been dented, but probably it hasn't been, not very much anyway.

But I'd been by that time in South India and leading this sort of wandering and semi-wandering life for two years, and so I sort of tested myself and I was quite sure that yes, I can lead this life. It's not beyond me, and then of course I had that vision in the cave, and I took that to mean that, yes, I'd completed that two year trial period that I'd given myself, and yes, I should now go ahead and seek formal ordination. So that's the significance I attached to it at that time. Whether that was really the significance or whether that was just the interpretation I gave it is quite impossible to say naturally. But it could have a further significance, I don't know. You might well say well why Amitabha? Is it because Amitabha's connected with the West? I doubt if I knew then that Amitabha was connected with the West. And his red colour, and the setting sun, which is not completely traditional though in the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra* there is the description of the setting sun, and I had read those sutras back in England. But whether that had anything to do with it I don't know, because in the vision he was quite definitely a half disc of the setting sun, whereas in the sutra it is definitely the complete disc, the whole globe. And then again this holding up of the red lotus. Now of course we see it isn't really completely untraditional but I'd certainly never seen a picture of Amitabha holding up a red lotus. So in a way I don't know where it came from, psychologically speaking or archetypally speaking. So in some ways I don't know what the full significance of it was. Perhaps that will only emerge in the future. I can't really say. But it is interesting that Amitabha is the Buddha of the West. Perhaps that does have some significance but I doubt if I knew that at the time.

Suvajra: Did you make the connection between the name of the cave and Amitabha?

S: I didn't at the time, but yes it was *Virupakshaguha* and *Virupaksha* is one of the four guardians and he is the guardian of, yes it's the Western direction isn't it. And further connections - *Virupaksha*, what does *Virupaksha* mean? *Virup aksha*. What is *Aksha*, *Aksha* is high. *Virup*. *Rupa* is *Rupa*. *Vi* is a sort of emphatic prefix. *Virup* means something like bulging. So *Virupaksha* is the one with bulging eyes, perhaps red eyes, bulging with fierceness and wrath because he is a protector. So I certainly didn't know anything about him then, or that he was connected with the West, and it was, yes, it was *Maharishi's Virupakshaguha*. *Virupaksha* by the way, the cave, was named after a *Virupaksha Rishi* who had lived there one doesn't know how many hundreds of years previously. The Hindus would say thousands of years previously, but it was named after the *Rishi* or *Muni Virupaksha*.

Suvajra: It's historically verified?

S: It's very difficult to say. Probably yes, since he lived in that particular cave, it's more than likely I think that he was an historical person. So there is that cluster of associations.

Suvajra: *Virupaksha* usually is depicted as being red.

S: Is that so? I'm always learning things. I didn't know that, yes. Hmm. And it was gave which has all sorts of associations. I think I mentioned in *The Thousand Petalled Lotus* that inside there was the samadhi of a yogi. I don't think it was the *Virupaksha Rishi*. I don't know if you know but in Hinduism yogis are very often buried and not cremated, yes. This suggests of course that yoga is perhaps of pre-Ariyan origin. Because you know that there's the famous seated figure on the *Mahendradhara* seal which Hindus say is a yogi and they say that that shows that yoga is pre-Ariyan and, as it were,

indigenous, and Dravidian, and yes, it is interesting anyway that yogis traditionally are not cremated. Cremation being an Ariyan custom introduced by the Ariyan invaders. Yogis are normally buried, and where they are buried, their tomb is called a *samadhi*, it's a popular Hindu usage of the word *samadhi*. So the *samadhi* of a yogi was right there in the cave. It was in the form of a big platform for you to sleep on it. [Laughter] So there he was buried, there in the cave.

_____: Did you have the vision in the sleeping state or the waking state or meditating or...?

S: It was while I was asleep but it wasn't a dream. It was from, as it were, the sleep state.

_____: So you were probably on the *samadhi* when....

S: I must have been, yes, on the *samadhi*, yes lying on the *samadhi*. But it was very very vivid. I don't think I've had a visionary experience as vivid as that ever. Not that I've had many visionary experiences. I'm not a particularly visionary person, but that was by far and away the most vivid of my experiences and left a very strong impression, more so than from any other experience of that type I've had at any time. And this is now well over thirty four years ago?

Suvajra: Forty. More than forty.

S: More than forty.

Shantiprabha: Was there a build up to the vision.

S: I was certainly meditating and leading a quite ascetic life. I've described I think my general way of life in *The Thousand Petalled Lotus*. I was going down to (unclear) from my one meal of the day at eleven o'clock. I was spending a lot of time in meditation. Just sitting for a while quietly in (unclear)'s Ashram just in the congregation, as it were. Not every day but most days. I was spending quite a bit of time in meditation. So, yes there was, you could say, a build up, and before that Satyapriya and myself had been in Ram Dass' Ashram and we spent most of our time there meditating. We were there for I think, was it six weeks? - it might have been longer, at least six weeks. So yes you could say there was a build up. And I think I must have - I don't remember definitely but I must have been thinking whether to go back to North India, whether the time had come to take formal ordination and therefore saw this experience as the answer to that question.

Harshaprabha: Did the experience last the whole night? Was it your, as it were, bulk of your sleeping state?

S: I can't say. I can't connect any sense of time with it. It could have lasted half an hour, it could have lasted less than that, could have lasted more than that. I can't say. It must have lasted some length of time. It certainly wasn't a momentary experience. It lasted some length of time, but how long I couldn't say. It was as it were a quite substantial experience, if you see what I mean.

Harshaprabha: Were you in deep sleep or was it like a twilight zone you were in between sleep and waking?

S: No, it wasn't like a twilight zone. I was quite oblivious of the physical body, quite oblivious of mental states, quite oblivious of dreams. It was just like entering into an actual space, as it were.

_____: When you received the Amitabha practice later, did that recall the vision?

S: I don't think it did, no. I think it was something quite separate. Well in a way separate but with no direct connection with that visionary experience, no. And that Amitabha initiation, I made some notes at the time which I still have, was definitely of Amitabha in Sukhavati. I visualised him as actually residing in Sukhavati. Whereas of course in the vision of mine I saw him on the red lotus on the sea. Again not as far as I know traditional. It's difficult to say. One might still come across a thangka where Amitabha is shown sitting on a red lotus floating on the sea. It's quite possible. I remember years ago

I came across a quite strange thangka. I wasn't able to find out what it represented, of a tree, it was definitely a tree and not a big lotus, a tree growing out of the water, with various figures on the branches. It was just a poster like reproduction of a thangka. I'd never seen it illustrated in a book, and I wasn't able to find out what it represented. So Buddhist tradition is very very vast and one can't dogmatise about what isn't in it. It's not impossible to come across a thangka showing Amitabha on a red lotus floating on the water.

Oh dear! One of the long questions starts off - this is somewhat peripheral - [Laughter] and the other question is about sadhana practice in general, and its place in our spiritual life in the Order. I think that is one of the things that I'll have to deal with in a paper properly. I had been thinking about this a few weeks ago, and thinking of it in general terms as a suitable subject for a paper on an Order anniversary. This whole question of the, as it were, philosophical significance of the visualisation and

how it ties up with Buddhist thought. How it relates to the three kayas and so on. I think it's something I have to give some attention to because I've only just referred to these things here and there, mostly in seminars.

So as regards the place of visualisation in our overall system of practice, there is of course the lecture on *A System of Meditation* which I gave about ten or twelve years ago to an Order convention, one of the early Order conventions, one at Vinehall, and maybe it will be useful to consult that. I speak there of mindfulness and mettā and various recollections of death and the element practice and also of course the visualisation of a Buddha or Bodhisattva practice. So that might help for the time being.

It doesn't seem to be generally known these days.

_____: It's in *A Guide to the Buddhist Path*.

S: All of it?

Suvajra: No.

S: Probably just part of it, right. Yes that's good. But it is a full length talk I gave to the Order.

Anyway I'm afraid, yes, I will have to leave these more elaborate questions for treatment in some other way or on some future occasion. But don't hold back your questions. If you have questions at any time, even if I'm not able to answer them say in letters, send them in because I am after all writing all the time on various things, and it may well be that, in the course of this or that writing, I can deal with that particular point, that particular question. Lama Govinda used to have a circular letter that he sent out to all his correspondents, which read, '*Lama Govinda was very pleased to receive your letter. Unfortunately he has no time to attend to correspondence, but any question relating to the Dharma included in your letter will be dealt with in one of his future publications.*' [Laughter] And I'm sure it wasn't just for the sake of keeping the correspondent at bay. I'm sure, knowing Lama Govinda, he filed away all those questions and I'm sure he did get around to answering quite a few of them. So I hope to do something of the same.

Oh just one final practical question.

In your visualisation of Amitabha, you mention clear and radiant eyes. Could you tell us the colour?

Well traditionally a Buddha's eyes are always deep blue. Very deep blue, and of course his hair is described as being a glossy blue-black. So let's close on that note then.

_____: The vision that you had. You described it to us going through the practice in quite a lot of detail. How faithful do you want us to be to that particular vision and how free are we to improvise.

S: I think one starts off doing any traditional practice, one should at least begin by being quite faithful. If later on your experience starts changing spontaneously, well one can allow it to change, but I think that the change needs to be always within the same general framework, unless you are consciously departing from that framework and, as it were, exploring on your own. But I think you have to be quite careful not to mix up, as it were, psychological things with purely, as it were, spiritual traditional things. For instance you might have sort of not exactly visions but you might have visual experiences related to your early childhood and they might come up, as people say, while you are doing your visualisation practice. That doesn't mean that you're developing a new kind of visualisation. I think one has to be able to distinguish those. So I think broadly speaking you stay with the tradition, and visualise according to that, until such time as you can be quite sure that you are developing something, as it were, of your own, in the same direction and with the same general significance, and that you're not just associating with it, on purely psychological grounds, experiences belonging just to your purely personal past history and psychology.

_____: For example there are various other images and thangkas of Amitabha and also of Amitayus, and it's quite normal to find one figure or one particular figure with certain details that has a stronger effect on one than others. I suppose I am a bit confused in that you've asked us to do the practice as you had the experience, the vision that you had, and at the same time for me personally for example I have been visualising Amitabha dressed in silks, so to speak, and with long hair etc., so what I want to know....

S: Well long hair is definitely untraditional for a Buddha. So if one very definitely departs from tradition, not just one particular kind of Amitabha but the whole tradition, then one must be quite careful about that. I'm not saying one can't do it but one should be quite sure why one is doing it or how it comes about. Otherwise one ends up or some people could end up

without a sadhana at all, doing something quite sort of personal and subjective obviously. Generally at least to begin with the variations are within the sort of standard framework. For instance the embroidered robe, well have any kind of robe embroidery you like, or yes, the lotus throne - you can vary that and you can vary the supports and if there are other figures, well yes you can vary those or you can vary the fruits and flowers by which the figure is surrounded. But I think one has to be careful about departing too radically from tradition, until of course such time as you are quite well into - I won't say the practice but - the underlying spiritual trend of the practice.

Vajramala: with figures of Amitabha but the princely garb in the British Museum, that one.

Suvajra: With long hair. Amitayus with long hair.

S: That would be a Bodhisattva form.

_____: I have also seen pictures of the Five Jinas all dressed in Bodhisattva silks, but as the Five Jinas, so....

S: Very often it happens or sometimes at least it happens that when Buddhas appear in, as it were, Sambhogakaya form, then they appear more richly dressed. But I think the main point here is that one should be sure that any variation comes from, as it were, a definitely spiritual source within yourself and isn't just a sort of product of a kink in your personal psychology. Do you see what I mean? [Laughter] Well I suppose it's something that one can discover only from personal experience and reflection and the rest of it.

_____: Having a pink tulip instead of a lotus. [Laughter] That sort of thing as an example.

S: One can't rule out tulips. [Laughter] I think one has to steer a middle way between following tradition in the too literalistic sense and being, as it were, on the other hand, too individualistic. One wants some scope for personal experience and, as it were, creativity, but on the other hand one does need some sort of fidelity to tradition and there's a middle way, no doubt, to be followed between those two. So one might well end up with some quite distinctive version of one's own but it needs to be definitely the product of one's own deeper spiritual experience. Sometimes people's minds or brains can get very busy thinking oh it would be nice to do it in this way, nice to do it in that way. That's a different sort of thing.

_____: I was thinking about the visualisations of the *Amitayus Dhyana Sutra*. Would you discourage people from maybe doing parts of those? I know it's very complex but....

S: Oh no.

_____: it's is a sort of contemplation of faith....

S: They're not all that complex actually. Not in the early stages anyway. No, if people had sufficient time I wouldn't discourage them at all. But you probably need a whole day. If you're on solitary retreat you can do that. Well there are fourteen stages and you could have fourteen sessions. You could even spread it over a week with two stages per day. You could certainly do that. It might help to unify, say a one week solitary retreat. It would certainly be worth experimenting with. I do believe that there have been groups of devotees in China actually pursuing these practices. I don't think they're dead letters by any means, though we ourselves may not have established contact with anyone doing those practices. They may be just hidden away these days. But it does seem in the past these practices were pursued quite vigorously by quite a few people.

Is that clear about striking this balance between fidelity to tradition and individual, as it were, creativity?

Khemanandi: So what about something like the mantra being there all the way through, the mantra being there early on in the practice?

S: I did speak that after the mantra repetition had started trying to keep the visualised figure in view at the same time. That shouldn't be too difficult in a general way because one is visual and the other is auditory.

Khemanandi: No but I mean if the mantra is there at the beginning of the visualisation before you actually build it up so that it's something that's going on all the time because (unclear) of the practice say the mantra was there.

S: I can't say for sure but I think with practice if one was doing the practice intensively, then you'd have the double experience. You'd have the mantra in its visual form as it were in front of your mental eye at least, and you would simultaneously have that sound of the mantra being recited just going on at least in the background. It is the aim of all mantra recitation practices or visualisation practices, to have something going all the time. In fact I think I've mentioned that in Tibetan Buddhism the mantra recitation is often called the in between practice. It's what connects one session of sitting

meditation and visualisation with another. You don't lose contact completely.

But there's something else I've also said which perhaps I should say now. I've said it in response to people's questions, that when you get up from the meditation, should you dissolve the figure back into the void or should you just leave it and as it were carry it with you into the world. In principle it's the same thing with the mantra recitation. What I've said is this. That if your going back into the world is a sort of easy transition, you're not going into a very difficult and demanding situation, well you can allow the mantra recitation to carry on, perhaps even the visualisation, but if you are going back into a situation which is difficult, which requires all your attention, it's best just to end the practice. Otherwise you may find yourself almost in a schizophrenic state, trying to attend to the matter in hand, at the same time trying to keep up at least a repetition of the mantra.

If straight after your meditation you're just going for a quiet walk in the country, by all means carry as much of the practice with you as you can. But if you're going to have to cross busy city streets and catch buses and go on tubes and things of that sort then it's best just to drop it for the time being.

OK perhaps we really had better end there.

Righto then.

Voices: Thank you.

End of session

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