

Imagination 4

Om Ah Hum Vajra Guru Padma Siddhi Hum

Introduction

These are the notes from the final week of a four-week journey with the Bristol Sangha, exploring imagination through the Buddhist tradition and how we can use imagination, creatively and practically, in our own spiritual lives. We've looked at:

Week One: The Buddha & his teachings - introducing imagination:

- Why imagination matters – it's a 'faculty' we all have which can sense 'a reality beyond ego clinging'. This is the Middle Way the Buddha taught.
- If we don't use imagination consciously and creatively, *it* will use *us*, in an unconscious and *reactive* way. Our imagination can be 'captured' and held hostage by anxiety, aversion, sexual craving and consumerism.
- The powerful 'Kings and Queens of our energies' will lie inert and dormant if we don't connect with something big enough, and deep enough to wake them up and inspire them.
- We can become 'Warriors of the Imagination' in an age which on the one hand denigrates and denies imagination whilst, on the other, manipulates, uses and captures it, to keep us tied into consumerist craving and an energy-sapping anxiety. This erodes our capacity to connect with each other and find the kind of deep, *vibrant* peace which *cannot* be bought.
- We can be 'Warriors of the Imagination' just by stopping and sitting with the Buddha – like Pingiya. It's a radical, political act to sit still, stop consuming, stop angsty and learn to just *be*. And it's contagious.

Question for the week: Do we recognise our own creative and reactive imagination? If so, how does it manifest?

Week Two: Mahayana Stories & Parables - watering the roots

- The Buddhist tradition is an unfolding of the Middle Way taught by the Buddha.
- It can be seen both as a 'path' and as a 'lotus', ie 'going somewhere' or 'simply unfolding'. We need both models/images/metaphors – there are up sides and down sides to both and what we need at different times changes. This is the 'dance' of the polarity map. (See notes from Week 2 for illustration.)
- The White Lotus Sutra, in the parable of the plants (or rain cloud), teaches us that we all have 'seeds' of inspiration and awakening in us. These are inert and dormant for want of the moisture, warmth and light of the Dharma.
- We all grow into different plants – but in the same garden. We may be introvert/extrovert, calm/energetic/ more 'head'/more 'heart', more verbal/more non-verbal.

- As verse 166 of the Dhammapada remind us - “Your work is to discover your work, and then with all your heart, to give yourself to it.”

Question for the week: Do we feel we have 'seeds' of potential in us? What waters our roots?

Week Three: Tantric Buddhism and the Mandala - transforming energy

- Tantric Buddhism is also known as the Vajrayana, the 'way of the Vajra'
- The vajra can symbolise the path of transforming 'poisons' (unskillful mental states) into 'wisdoms', facing our darkest imaginings, reclaiming and transforming those energies.
- Seen from a less familiar angle, 'end on', the vajra can also be seen as including the image of the lotus or flower. Deepening into/through and unfolding our experience moment by moment is a vajric practice.
- A lot of energy gets stirred up and released when we practice in this way – the Kings and Queens of our energies wake up! And sometimes they get into conflict with each other (in us) and other people...
- The image of the Mandala offers us a key to working with these energies, individually/internally and collectively/externally to create harmony.
- A mandala is a harmonious arrangement of elements/energies around a big enough/deep enough central point to connect with them all.
- The Mandala of the Five Buddhas is an imaginative representation of the enlightened qualities of Shakyamuni Buddha, arranged as a mandala. This can be helpful as it's easier to relate to a quality or value *embodied* in a being rather than as an abstract concept.

Question for the week: What would we put in the centre of our 'mandala'? What awakens our 'Kings and Queens' – and what do we *react* to? (There's a lot of energy and rich fuel for transformation in our aversion!)

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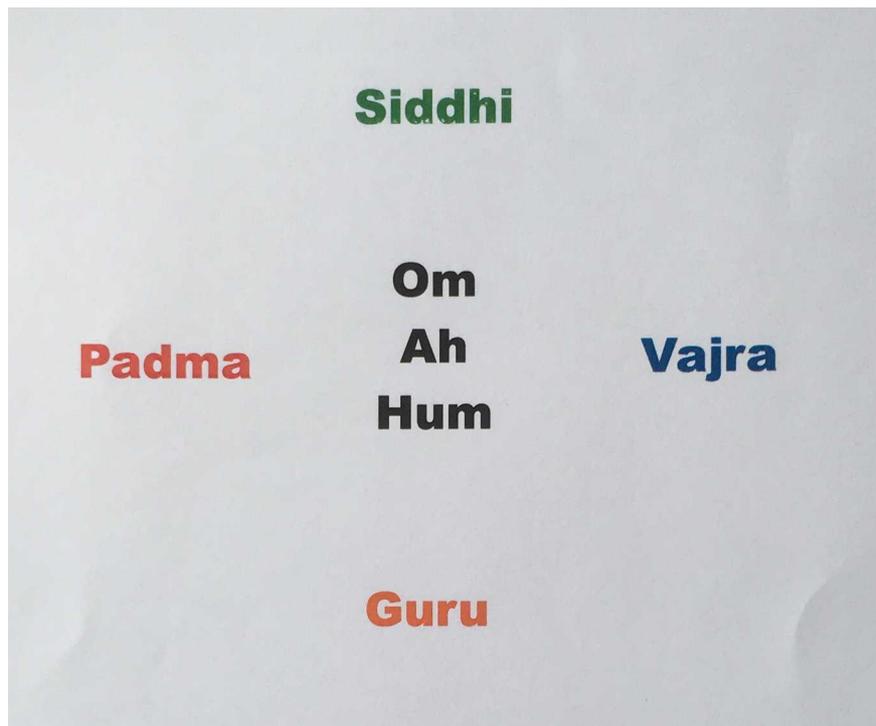
So we come to week four: Bhante (“Teacher”) Sangharakshita and our own tradition - the role of imagination and the future of Buddhism.

Padmasambhava, Demons and establishing the Dharma in Tibet

Last week we looked at the heart of Tantric/Vajrayana Buddhism, but we didn't talk about the historical aspect of the tradition. One figure is so central to the establishment of the Dharma in Tibet that he's often called 'the Second Buddha'. To tell the story briefly, an Abbot called Shantarakshita wanted to establish the Dharma in Tibet and he began teaching and building a monastery. Long, slow and laborious work. Hard work. It was made even harder because the workmen would work all day, building the walls of the monastery but then, at night, the local demons would come out and knock them down again. This happened over and over and over again. In the end they'd had enough and decided they needed help, so they sent for someone renowned for taming and transforming the energies of demons – Padmasambhava.

Padmasambhava has actually been there the whole time we've been making our way through this series – you might not have noticed him. He's been sat at the window there at the back. He's also been sitting in my heart, as there have been a few demons in there in need of his presence! He's never far away. As he says “I am never far away from those with faith, or even those without. I sleep on the threshold.”

So we're going to pause and invite him to come join us in full view, in the centre of the shrine. We'll chant his mantra, his 'sound symbol'. But before we do that, I just wanted to share with you an interesting thing about it that I learned a few years ago. The Padmasambhava mantra can be seen as encompassing the entirety of the five Buddha mandala:



There isn't time to unpack this now, but we will *chant* the mantra, experience it and invite Padmasambhava to manifest on the shrine.

Sangharakshita, Padmasambhava and establishing the Dharma in the West & beyond

Sangharakshita has found that the image of Padmasambhava has stirred energies deep in his heart, like our 'Kings and Queens', from the first time he saw an image of him, in Darjeeling in the early 1950s. He'd never seen a Nyingma temple of before:

“As I entered the temple, all the greater was the shock, therefore, when I saw in front of me, three or four times larger than life, the mighty sedent figure of the semi-legendary founder and inspirer of the Nyingma tradition, a skull cup in his left hand, a staff topped with skulls in the crook of his left arm, and the celebrated 'wrathful smile' on his moustached face. All this I took in instantly, together with the 'lotus hat', the richly embroidered robes... Having taken it in, I felt that it had always been

there, and that in seeing the figure of Padmasambhava I had become conscious of a spiritual presence that had in fact been with me all the time.”

In other words, that magical figure had activated, at a very deep level, a part of me that hitherto had lain dormant and unrecognized. Though I had not seen it before, it was strangely familiar. It was familiar as my own self, yet at the same time infinitely mysterious, infinitely wonderful, and infinitely inspiring. Familiar, mysterious, wonderful and inspiring it was to remain. Indeed, the Precious Guru was to occupy a permanent place in my spiritual life.”¹

About ten years after Bhante's first encounter with Padmasambhava he was introduced to the visualisation practice of him, by one of his Tibetan teachers, Kachu Rimpoche – he tells the story of this very engagingly in *Precious Teachers*. At the same time, Kachu Rimpoche bestowed an 'extra name' on Sangharakshita. This was 'Urgyen' and it's a name that directly relates him to Padmasambhava's. 'Urgyen' is a Tibetan version of 'Uddiyana', which is the country North-West of India where Padmasambhava was born. Bhante says he “was delighted to receive the name, which served to confirm my connection with the Precious Guru, besides suggesting that my true home was in the mysterious land of Uddiyana.”

History and Myth

All this is very mythic and imaginal – and for some of us very irritating. It's not about the here and now, nuts and bolts of spiritual practice, or is it? When I started practising I was pretty irritated by all the stuff about 'men in funny hats' and I couldn't see the point. But gradually, gradually – and particularly on that retreat I told you about the other week, at Rivendell in 1995 - something began to connect in my heart-mind. Or maybe some of my 'Kings and Queens' started to wake up and realise they were being spoken to by these images.

The fact is, as we've been saying, that the imaginal/the mythic has a vital role to play in enabling us to gather and motivate our energies in the direction we want to go. This image of dormant seeds or mythical embodiments of our 'greater energies' is a key to understanding Bhante – *Urgyen* – Sangharakshita and his presentation of the Dharma. Padmasambhava is a figure said to be part-historical and part-mythical. Bhante is a living, breathing historical figure for us (at the moment) but he's also a kind of guide or portal through which we can connect with that vast 'more than' realm of Reality which really only our imaginative faculties have the power to connect with.

So let's stop and look at the shrine we have here as an image of where we're heading. We've got this big painting of Vairocana, the 'still point'/centre of the Mandala of the Five Buddhas. Don't forget (going back to week one) that *behind* him we've got the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni. He's physically there, in Aloka's painting hung on the wall. We've just got Vairocana hanging in front of him at the mo. So we could see these as symbolising the 'goal' which want to approach – nirvana, enlightenment, awakening. Whatever that means for us. But it's not as easy as just walking up there. These energies we stir up, they're going to include demons – so it's just as well we've got Padmasambhava sat there now, in front of Vairocana on the shrine. But can we even

1 From *Precious Teachers* by Sangarakshita, p 78

approach Padmasambhava? Do we even *want* to? Do we really understand – and are we ready for – the 'Vajra Guru' or 'Tantric Guru'(as he's called)?

We need help to approach – and understand - Padmasambhava (& the Buddha), so this is where Bhante comes in. [At this point I got out the large new photo of Aloka's painting of Bhante as a 'guide to the beyond'² and put him at the front of the shrine.] He stands here, at the front nearest us as an intermediary, as a *translator*, as a spiritual friend who can see more of the terrain than we can.

Do you remember, in week two, when we were talking about the unfolding of the Mahayana tradition, we looked at how there are teachings of 'explicit' meaning and teachings of 'implicit' meaning? Some, like the Four Noble Truths are simple, clear, unambiguous. Others are much more complex and open to misinterpretation. So looking at Padmasambhava, well, in this day and age, even the word 'guru' has a dodgy ring to it, doesn't it? Do we *really* understand what the Buddhist tradition meant by the word guru? Bhante gave an important lecture back in the 1970s called 'Is a Guru Necessary?' when he explored what a guru is – and isn't. It's a good example of him taking a traditional term or concept, really exploring and turning it over and translating it for our benefit. One could say that his overall conclusion on this one is that rather than a 'guru', what we really need are spiritual friends, 'horizontal', alongside us on the path, our peers and 'up ahead a bit' or 'vertical' – those who have a bigger perspective on the path and on spiritual practice. Both kinds of friends can offer us both challenge and support. Both are indispensable.

We (our 'reactive imaginations') can want Bhante to be all sorts of other things – the perfect teacher, the father substitute, someone on a pedestal who gives us all the answers, that we can just trust unthinkingly...

Bhante Himself

But let's go back to Bhante and see if we can find our way into some understanding of who he is – and who he is *for us*, as the followers of the tradition which he began. None of us would be here if it wasn't for him. There wouldn't be any Order Members, Mitras, Friends. There'd be no Centres, Classes, Retreat Centres. No global Buddhist movement called Triratna. There are emphases we have here – on Sangha, on Imagination, on Friendship, which wouldn't exist in this way, that we can take for granted.

Who (or what?) is the person who started our movement?

Bhante and Imagination

You might know that he was born in Tooting in 1925. When he was 8 years old he was confined to bed with a suspected heart-condition for 2 years. As he says "I promptly developed a habit of avid and incessant reading which never afterwards left me." He describes how he devoured the Harmsworth Children's Encyclopedia – of which

"not a page of those sixty-one parts remained unread, [though] it was inevitable that some subjects should interest me more than others. My favourite sections, to which

2 This painting lives at Padmaloka and it's proper title is 'Sangharakshita as Mythophanic Psychopomp'! There's a wee video of Lokeshvara talking about it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcNthYyGy18>

I turned most frequently, and over which I lingered longest, were the ones dealing with art, with history, and with literature.... Strangely enough the Philosophy section, which discussed abstract ideas such as Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and Justice, all of which the editor had stoutly capitalized, failed to awaken in me the love of wisdom, though I studied with interest the lives of the great philosophers, as well as those of the Buddha.”³

When he was 12 something happened that changed his life:

“That Christmas (1937) I met with a book that swung me, almost violently, from art to literature. Among the presents at my bedside on Christmas morning was a blue-bound copy of Paradise Lost, the title of which had stood high on my latest book list. That morning I had the greatest poetic experience of my life. If it was the reading of Spenser that made a poet of Keats, it was that apocalypse of Miltonic sublimity that made of me, from that day onwards, if not a poet yet at least a modest practitioner of the art of verse. Thereafter I knew no rest until I had planned an epic of my own,”⁴

We don't have time to continue with a chronology now, but it's worth reflecting on this moment, just as with the earlier 'moment' with Padmasambhava. Each time, it was as if something was 'woken up' in Bhante, and he responded wholeheartedly. What's more, the effect of each of these 'moments' carried on resonating through his whole life. To this day his connection with Padmasambhava is of huge significance and he spoke to me of his love of Milton when I saw him last year. More than that, quite recently he said to one of his friends that he would 'like to be remembered as a poet' – the way in which our Order and Movement could be seen as a poem by Bhante rather intrigues and fascinates me!

There's a bit more about Bhante's 'literary heroes' which I want to mention, as they shed a fascinating light on his imagination. In his 2015 book *A Moseley Miscellany*, Bhante describes how

“I was so fortunate as to meet all five literary heroes quite early in life. So that I have now had the benefit of their companionship for more than seventy years. I met Dr Johnson, as I have always called him, before I met any of the others. I met him at Tooting Public Library, when I borrowed, two at a time, the six volumes of his Lives of the Poets... My first acquaintance with William Blake was courtesy of Tooting Public Library, an institution to which I shall be ever grateful.”⁵

Bhante goes on to say that “Whereas Johnson was conservative in politics and religion, Blake was decidedly radical in both.” Bhante loves both. *He loves, is and embraces contradictions.* (Though he probably wouldn't put it that way himself – that's how *I* see it.)

In *The Rainbow Road*, Bhante famously describes the tension between his two 'inner characters' 'Sangharakshita I' (the poet) and 'Sangharakshita II' (the ascetic monk) when he was living the wandering holy life in India in his 20s:

3 From *The Rainbow Road* by Sangharakshita, to be republished in March 2017 as part of his 'Complete Works'

4 See note 2.

5 From *A Moseley Miscellany* by Sangharakshita p110-12

*Sangharakshita I wanted to enjoy the beauty of nature, to read and write poetry, to listen to music, to look at paintings and sculpture, to experience emotion, to lie in bed and dream, to see places, to meet people. Sangharakshita II wanted to realize the truth, to read and write philosophy, to observe the precepts, to get up early and meditate, to mortify the flesh, to fast and pray. Sometimes Sangharakshita I was victorious, sometimes Sangharakshita II, while occasionally there was an uneasy duumvirate. What they ought to have done, of course, was to marry and give birth to Sangharakshita III, who would have united beauty and truth, poetry and philosophy, spontaneity and discipline; but this seemed to be a dream impossible of fulfilment.*⁶

He describes their attempts to reconcile – mornings meditating and studying the Dharma, afternoons reading poetry and staring at the sky, but

*One day there was a violent clash between them. Angered by the encroachments of Sangharakshita I, who was reading more poetry than ever, and who had written a long poem which, though it had a Buddhist theme, was still a poem, Sangharakshita II suddenly burned the two notebooks in which his rival had written all the poems he had composed from the time of their departure from England ... After this catastrophe, which shocked them both, they learned to respect each other's spheres of influence. Occasionally they even collaborated...*⁷

I think this helps us see that Bhante had big energies not always going in the same direction. He has described how he feels he “‘would have gone mad,’ if he hadn't found some object of commitment as worthy, as all-consuming, or as noble as the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – [ie = something to hold the centre of his mandala] that the powerful and diverse forces of his nature would have ripped him apart.”⁸

What are we to make of Bhante, then?

In 1990, 27 years ago, on the 22nd anniversary of the founding the Order Bhante gave a talk called *My Relation to the Order*. In it, he candidly admits that

*One of the illusions about myself which I do not cherish is that I was the most suitable person to be the found of a new Buddhist movement in Britain – in the world, as it turned out. I possessed so few of the necessary qualifications; I laboured under so many disadvantages. When I look back on those early days, and think of the difficulties I had to experience (not that I always thought of them as difficulties), I cannot but feel that the coming into existence of the Western Buddhist Order was little short of a miracle. Not only did the lotus bloom from the mud; it had to bloom from the mud contained within a small and inadequate pot. Perhaps it had to bloom just then or not at all, and perhaps this particular pot was the only one available.*⁹

6 From *The Rainbow Road*

7 As note 5

8 *Dharmalife* magazine, Vol 26, available online: <http://www.dharmalife.com/issue26/profile.html>. And Perhaps it's not a surprise, then, that one of only two books which Bhante copied out in its entirety by hand is William Blake's 'Marriage of Heaven and Hell'. And he says, in an oft-quoted aphorism, “*I am much worse than people think I am, and also much better.*” (from *Peace is a Fire*).

9 From *My Relation to the Order*, available on-line: http://www.sangharakshita.org/_books/relation-to-the-order.pdf

He goes on to describe the 'onerous responsibility of founding the Order' but how

“Nonetheless, there are times when, far from feeling that it was I who took on the responsibility, I feel that it was the responsibility that took on me.. There are times when I am dimly aware of a vase, overshadowing Consciousness that has, through me, founded the Order and set in motion our whole Movement.”¹⁰

Bhante is a complex man with a lot of energy. I've heard more than one of his most loyal senior disciples describe him (very affectionately!) as 'weird'! He has found a way to focus his vast and divergent energies behind the vision and inspiration that has created a world-wide movement. He has also acted in ways that many people have found painful and very recently he's made a personal statement acknowledging this fact. On 30 December 2016 he wrote:

I have more than once said that I was not the best person to found a new Buddhist movement, but the only one that was available, and friends have sometimes assured themselves and others that my words were not to be taken literally but were only a sign of my humility. But this is not the case. At the time I meant them to be taken literally and I still mean them to be taken literally.

I being its founder, Triratna sometimes bears the mark not of the Dharma but of my own particular personality. That personality is a complex one and in certain respects I did not act in accordance with what my position in the movement demanded or even as a true Buddhist. I am thinking in particular of the times when I have hurt, harmed or upset fellow Buddhists, whether within Triratna or out of it.¹¹

Revering and Relying on the Dharma

Like the Buddha, Bhante has taught and encouraged us not to rely on *him* personally but to rely on the Dharma. In 'Is a Guru necessary?' he says “The Buddha never asked anybody to have faith in him, much less to have absolute faith, and it's very important to remember this” He points us to a teaching of the Buddha that we should 'test the teachings in our own experience as a goldsmith tests gold in the fire.’’

The Buddha and Bhante both followed what sparked in their own hearts, the seeds that were there. The Buddha followed those sparks, nurtured those seeds until he attained full and perfect awakening and was able to elucidate a path that others might follow, to unfold their *own* awakening.

Bhante first really 'heard' the teachings of the Buddha when he was in his teens and read the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Sutra of Hui Neng*. He says of this experience:

When I read the Diamond Sutra I knew that I was a Buddhist. Though this book epitomizes a teaching of such rarefied sublimity that even Arahants, saints who have attained individual nirvana, are said to become confused and afraid when they hear it for the first time, 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

¹⁰ See note 8

¹¹ This *Personal Statement* is posted on Bhante's website: <http://www.sangharakshita.org/personal-statement.html>

*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.*¹²

Once again, there's that sense of the Dharma – the *rain* of the Dharma – awakening and bringing to life the inert 'seeds' that had lain dormant in the young man who would become Sangharakshita. Those seeds took root and led him, several years later, when he found himself at the end of his National Service in India, to go forth as a homeless wanderer. In the years that followed, he met and practised with many teachers – but teachers from different schools and lineages. He wasn't following *their* path, he was following the unfolding of his own 'seeds of inspiration' and drawing nourishment and renewed inspiration whenever he found an appropriate source along the way. There's much that could be said about this – and its relevance to the founding of our Order and movement. But for the purposes of our current exploration, a simple focus will suffice:

- Bhante discovered the 'seeds' of inspiration, his **vision** of the Dharma Life, within himself at an early age
- These were nurtured both by explicit Dharma study and practice but also by poetry, literature, art, music etc
- He came to recognise the difference between a 'Dharma Life' based around rules, rituals as ends in themselves and the formulaic observance of practices and lifestyles and the 'living Dharma' which he recognised in his own experience, as it resonated with the early teachings of the Buddha.
- His life's work has been about communicating and sharing that in the most effective way possible.

After his 20 years in India, he was invited to return to England as 'the senior-most English Bhikkhu' at the time. After he'd actually *been* here a couple of years, teaching his radical brand of Buddhism and being quite outspoken about the problems he saw all too clearly with the 'English Buddhist establishment' *he* decided that he should stay England permanently and teach the Dharma here. However, by this time 'the establishment' didn't *want* him to stay. He only found this out once he was back in India, tying up his affairs for a permanent return to England. There's a lovely episode in his memoirs¹³ where he receives the letter from the English Sangha Trust, breaking this news, and he immediately turns to his companion and says "You know what this means? A new Buddhist movement!"

As we've already explored, it wasn't his 'plan' to set up a new movement and he's never felt he was the best person for the job. But he clearly has had the inspiration, the vision and the capacity to communicate that inspiration and vision. His vision is that each Dharmafarer can only develop as an individual, not as a member of a homogenised group. That we each need to 'water the seeds' in us and grow into the tree, bush, fungus or daisy that we are – but to do that *in relation with each other*. In fact, in *My relation to the Order* he says:

I want to make just one more point. It concerns my own limitations as a person. That one is a person at all means that one has certain limitations. Apart from such obvious limitations as those of nationality, language, and class (or caste), there are the limitations imposed by the fact that one is of a particular temperament and experiences life in a particular kind of way. One can hardly be of all temperaments and experience life in every kind of way. One is either introvert or extravert,

¹² See *The Rainbow Road*, as above

¹³ See *Moving Against the Stream* by Sangharakshita

*Hellenist or Hebraist, Platonist or Aristotelian, Shraddhanusarin or Dharmanusarin, jnani or bhakta – though it is a case, more often than not, of one's being predominantly rather than exclusively the one or the other. That it is I, and not someone else, who stands to the Order in the relation of founder, preceptor, and so on, thus cannot but make a difference, as we have seen. But though it makes a difference that difference should not constitute a limitation. I am by temperament inclined to the humanities, let us say, rather than to science, and in teaching the Dharma I tend to present it in terms of the humanities, that is, in terms of literature, philosophy, and the fine arts. But this does not mean that those Order members who are by temperament more inclined to science should not present the Dharma in terms of nuclear physics or biology. The important thing is that the Dharma should be communicated to as many people as possible and this means communicating the Dharma in as many different ways as possible – always assuming, of course, that it is in fact the Dharma that is being communicated. In other words – and this is the point I want to make – **my own personal limitations should not be the limitations of the Order.** The Order should not be simply Sangharakshita writ large. Avalokiteshvara has a thousand hands, and each of the thousand hands holds a different object. Similarly, **Order members of particular temperaments have different talents, aptitudes, and capacities, and in making their respective contributions to the life and work of the Order they should allow – you should allow – those talents, aptitudes, and capacities full scope. The Order should be a rich and many-splendoured thing, with all kinds of facets. It doesn't have to be just a lotus-lake, or even a series of lotus-lakes. It can also be a rose garden, or a cabbage patch, as you prefer.***

How the Order unfolded in the early years

Bhante founded the Movement and Order in 1967-8 with a strong faith in how individuals could practise the Dharma *together* and grow *given the right conditions*. His understanding of the Buddha's most fundamental teaching of conditionality, of pratitya samutpada, is that spiritual life and growth *needs the right conditions*. Without the right conditions, development, unfolding, travelling the path is impossible.

More like a gardener than a master-strategist, Bhante made connections with people, sparked their own 'seeds of inspiration to life' and helped them to nourish and grow those seeds into an effective spiritual practice. There's a point when the seeds are sufficiently developed that one is ready to become a member of the Order – that's a mysterious business we can't go into right now!

What I do want to say, tho', is that what our Order and Movement has become has arisen out of the way in which the inspiration and energies of individual Order Members and Mitras *practising and working collectively* has flowered. Residential communities grew from people's experience on retreat and desire to live together ongoingly, single sex activities evolved as people found them to be of benefit, businesses started where people were inspired by the idea of working alongside fellow Dharma-farers.

Four Gifts

In 1976, when the Movement had been going almost 10 years, Bhante gave a series of four lectures in Brighton. These kind of 'summed up' the elements of the 'new Buddhism' which he had been sharing and 'growing' in the last 10 years. The principles were clear:

To lead a Buddhist life we need, above all, four things:

- *a vision of the kind of person we could become;*
- *practical methods to help us transform ourselves in the light of that vision;*
- *friendship to support and encourage us on the path;*
- *and a society or culture that supports us in our aspirations.*¹⁴

The lectures had titles which hint at the vast scope of Bhante's vision:

A method of personal development
A vision of human existence
The nucleus of a new society
A blueprint for a new world.

But the year before, poet that he is, Bhante had put the same thing another way in a poem entitled Four Gifts – and it ends with a challenge. But before I read (or maybe sing) you that poem I just want to touch on:

The role of imagination and the future of Buddhism

It's easy to look back over the history of Buddhism and take it for granted as some great edifice which has been established and endured over time. But look a little closer and there's a different perspective.

The Adhithana website has that wonderful quote from Gustav Mahler that “*Tradition is the handing on of the flame, and not the worship of ashes*’. It's easy to forget that the Dharma has only continued because it's been passed *as a lived experience*, from practitioner to practitioner over the centuries. Because ordinary human beings have allowed themselves to be 'ignited' by flame of inspiration and lived a Dharma Life, in turn inspiring and affecting others.

In some lineages, that 'thread' that has enabled the continuation of a tradition of practice has simply passed through one disciple before spreading out to a wide, wide web of a Sangha of followers. (eg Milarepa) In a way our tradition is a bit like this with Bhante – he's been this one pot, this one 'portal' through which a very particular presentation for the Dharma has come to life, one which is a flowering both of the spark or seed of inspiration catalysed by the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha *and* his love of Western culture, the arts, literature etc.

He has handed on to us Four Gifts in his presentation of the Dharma. The way in which we study, practise and realize these gifts affects the future of the Dharma in the world – in our lifetime and beyond. And there can be no doubt that the world needs the Dharma more than ever...

So I'll end with Bhante's Four Gifts:

¹⁴ From *Buddhism for Today and Tomorrow* by Sangharakshita

Four Gifts

I come to you with four gifts.

The first gift is a lotus-flower.
Do you understand?

My second gift is a golden net.
Can you recognize it?

My third gift is a shepherds' round-dance.
Do your feet know how to dance?

My fourth gift is a garden planted in a wilderness.
Could you work there?

I come to you with four gifts.
Dare you accept them?