

Week 2 – Who or What do Buddhists Worship?

Buddhism Level 2 – Ritual & Devotion

This is one of the most troublesome areas of Buddhism for some people – the area that looks most “religious”: worship, devotion, making offerings, bowing etc. And it’s one of the most delightful for other people.

WHAT IS WORSHIP?

Homage or reverence paid to a deity; the acts rites or ceremonies of worship; (archaic) worthiness, merit; recognition given or due to these; honour & respect OED

From “Worth-ship”. A natural flow of appreciation & valuing towards a being that seems to embody our ideals very strongly, embodies “worth”. Archaic definition suits better, unless you’re happy to think of Buddha as a deity.

Egalitarianism vs Spiritual “heirarchy”

Do I accept that there are other people more developed than I? Not just differently developed? How about people very considerably more developed? If we find this hard to accept, we’re living with an egalitarian worldview. This could make development very hard. “Flat earth” = no “up”.

Worship & devotion ISNT grovelling, “Oh I’m so rubbish, I’m not worthy”!

It seems to be a natural human impulse to orient to something greater than our perceived limitations. Even the Buddha wanted to worship. Soon after his Enlightenment he thought: “*One suffers if dwelling without reverence or deference.*”

Realising there was no living being more perfected than he, he reflected:

“What if I were to dwell in dependence on this very Dhamma to which I have fully awakened, honouring and respecting it?” SN 6.2

WHO OR WHAT DO BUDDHISTS WORSHIP?

Different ways we can relate:

- Keep it “literal”: the historical Buddha, his disciples, and everyone since then who has achieved transcendental insight
- Connect more archetypally: not just the “historical Buddha”, but all Buddhas of past and present, and the archetypal Buddhas in the 5 Buddha mandala. And all the archetypal Bodhisattvas as well as literal Bodhisattvas.

How do we relate to the so-called Archetypal figures?

Perhaps as if they are figures that appear at the furthest extent of our imagination / intuition, representing a truth just out of our reach. Does that mean they’re only in the imagination? Yes, but the same can be said for the world we know. Saying in what way, say, Amitabha is less real to me (if I relate to him strongly) than the wooden carving on the shrine is not easy. If my connection to Amitabha has an effect, an apparent life of its own, then to what extent is it non-existent?

Whole problem is in the terminology of exists / doesn’t exist. In daily life we need it; when we are talking about the transcendental figures, it’s no longer useful. If beings have gained Enlightenment, then what is their status now? We can’t answer this question.

The mind of a Buddha, we are told, is freed from all claims of 'me' and 'mine'. Buddhas do not, as we do, automatically and unconsciously erect barriers between themselves and the flow of conditions about them. In the mind of a Buddha there is no rigid boundary between self and other, no fixed ego-identity separating itself off from the flow of impressions, no unyielding barrier between the image and the imagination in which the image occurs. Ultimately, therefore, from the point of view of Enlightenment, there is no 'self' and no 'other'. No subject, no object, and no existential status.

The Refuge Tree, Bodhichitta and 'Other Power', Kulananda in Teachers of Enlightenment

Engaging in Buddhist ritual is an opportunity to soften our hard-edged understandings of the world, and open up to a little mystery, act "as if", be receptive to possibilities outside of our experience. The Buddha expressed this slightly differently:

"Whoever sees me sees the Dhamma; whoever sees the Dhamma sees me" (SN XXII.87)

The physical bodily form is an arbitrary, misleading detail when it comes to relating to Enlightened beings (and unenlightened beings!) So the tradition has conjured forms that imaginatively indicate something of the essence of the Enlightened mind symbolically through form. Eg. The beautiful luminous red body of the Buddha of love, Amitabha.

SYMBOLISM OF OFFERINGS



Anjali mudra – jewel in the lotus – thumbs form the jewel. Symbol of recognising our own potential, bowing down to someone who's realised that potential. Or bowing to that potential in us – projected out onto Buddha image or embodied in a Buddha image. Bowing to the Buddha "out there" or to our potential "in here" ultimately isn't so different; relate to it in whatever way is useful. We want to come in contact with it; make known our devotion, valuing of it – hence making offerings.

There's no right way to make offerings or bow. People usually bow before or after making offerings or both, but not essential. Feel free to offer in whatever way you like.

HOME PRACTICE

I suggest that you create a small "shrine" somewhere in your house, if you don't already have one. Negotiate (if necessary) a corner that will be special to you, preferably where you meditate. Decorate it in a way you find pleasing. And place the object(s) on it that you brought in today, or that in some way represent your aspirations. Perform a dedication ceremony by it if you like, to dedicate this space to the Three Jewels. Find some way to ritually "warm it up"; maybe by bowing to it each day, saying a short inspiration verse etc.

FURTHER READING

The Refuge Tree, Bodhichitta and 'Other Power', Kulananda in *Teachers of Enlightenment* or at: <http://www.madhyamavani.fwbo.org/2/refugetree.html>
The Cave, a short story by Sangharakshita, describing what it may have been like to meet the Buddha. CD P05