



## Buddhism 'Going Deeper' course

### The Journey and the Guide: Triratna's System of Dharma Practice



Over the next six weeks we shall be looking at a very important, self-contained and comprehensive model of spiritual life that very clearly sums up the practical interpretation of the Buddha's message within the Triratna Buddhist Community. As Dayanandi (a senior Order member here at the MBC) comments, "it contains the whole of the (Buddhist) path in principle, laying out the main points on the way".

The starting point for the course is very much the central conceptual formulation taught by the Buddha (and introduced on your Buddhism Foundation course) – **dependent arising and cessation**. We can see this teaching as describing a universal law, in some ways in the same sense as the laws of gravity or the behaviour of chemical elements – in other words, a set of completely reliable 'regularities'. The law of dependent arising and cessation is helpfully seen as operating in 5 different domains (*niyāmas* in Pali), as follows:

1. Physical – the domain of physics and chemistry, harnessed by human beings in the disciplines of science and technology;
2. Biological – the mechanisms of life, reproduction and death, and the disciplines of medicine and agriculture;
3. Psychological – the functioning of our nervous systems (and those of other animals), developed in humans through our upbringing and education;
4. Volitional (*karmic*) – unique to human beings, the domain of choice and ethics;
5. *Dharmic* – the domain of Reality itself, normally heavily obscured from limited human perception.

The System of Dharma Life will be working with the last 2 of these domains, looking at the energies they embrace and how we can use them to our spiritual advantage.

However, we need to identify what we mean by the word 'spiritual', and clarify how the 5 stages or dimensions of the System relate to us. To borrow from Maitreyabandhu at the London Buddhist Centre (see the 'resources' listing at the end of this document), we can say that our human life is a 'spiritual issue' simply because we're going to die – the glaring paradox is that this is a completely unavoidable truth, but one that we spend most of our time inwardly denying. Is this too strong a statement? You might want to examine your own experience in the light of this question. The five stages or dimensions are not some external teaching – rather, they're **intrinsic to our very lives**. In other words, any spiritual growth and maturation that we might achieve can only

take place by means of them. We might consider that 'spiritual life' is actually too ambiguous a term to meet this requirement – perhaps '**dharma life**' would be a preferable one.

We'll be looking at each of the five dimensions in weeks 2 to 6 of the course, identifying their characteristics and discussing our own relationship with them. In the following sections of this document we'll look, in outline, at what they consist of.

**1. Integration (mindfulness):** As we've already acknowledged, we know that sickness, old age and death are 'the great problems of life', but we don't behave as though we do. This can be seen as demonstrating a lack of integration – in other words, we don't see these three truths with the **whole** of ourselves. We can also add that we're alienated – this means that we see life at one step (if not more) removed, thanks to the scattered nature of our minds (and, to some extent, the alienating effect of communications technology). However, we can work to become more integrated – the intention here is that, as we become "grown up, happy, healthy human beings" (to quote Maitreyabandhu) we can increasingly see ourselves as we really are, and act appropriately. Sangharakshita puts it a little differently: "We get ourselves functioning as a smoothly-working whole, not a jumble of bits and pieces and fragments of selves, all jostling for supremacy".

We can use the energy of the *karma-niyāma* (the volitional domain of dependent arising & cessation), initially by recognising, and taking responsibility for, our '**moral agency**'. Integration involves finding an organising principle that absorbs all of the diverse elements of our personalities and unifies our otherwise-dissipated energies. The key to achieving this greater integration is that we need to know ourselves better, and to understand something about what set of conditions might best suit us. We need to be, as much as possible, in an objective situation where we can be ourselves (you might want to think about how true this might be in the case of your own life situation). Ideally, we need the support of a community and culture in which we can freely reveal ourselves to our peers, and enjoy them doing the same to us. Of course, this ideal is what we find in the sangha jewel at its best. Further, for committed the Buddhists the powerful organising principle that aids our integration is our commitment (i.e. our Going For Refuge) to the Buddha, dharma and sangha.

The secular idea of '**flow**' recognises that the unification of energy that's required in the dimension of integration can occur whenever we are fully engaged in a wide range of activities (not necessarily, but certainly including, meditation). This idea is associated with the work of the Croatian (or Hungarian) psychologist Mihali Csikszentmihalyi - a name to be conjured with. The meditation practice most explicitly connected with integration is the **Mindfulness of Breathing**. In it, we practice noticing the body and its natural movements, and avoid further 'disintegration' through becoming self-critical when our minds become distracted (as they are

guaranteed to do!). More generally, we can also practise awareness of other people and of the natural world around us.

2. **Skilful action (positive emotion):** It's not enough just to recognise that we're responsible for our actions (in the stage of **integration**); we also have to choose in which direction to act! It's important to realise that this isn't just about feeling, so a better term than the one often used ('positive emotion') may actually be 'skilful intention' (which comes from the Sanskrit *kusala karma*). Sangharakshita lists the characteristics of skilful intention as 'friendliness, compassion, joy, equanimity, faith and devotion' – you might notice how close this list is to the attributes making up Perfect Emotion that you might have covered in the 'Vision and Transformation' course. He also says that "...in as much as positive emotion is something that moves, not something static - this is also the stage of energy".

You might remember how Buddhism makes an intimate connection between action (the direct translation of *karma*) and mind – for example, the very first verses of the *Dhammapada* talk about actions being entirely dependent upon mind. Technically, Buddhism sees action as taking place in the three areas of body, speech and mind. The significance of the last of these, perhaps not immediately obvious, is that it involves **volition** - i.e. what we intend by what we do. As we already know, this is the working ground of Buddhist ethics; it's our volition (or intention) that can make the difference between the resulting action of body or speech having a beneficial (skilful) or harmful (unskilful) outcome.

Of course, the five precepts play a vital role in helping us to identify what is skilful, given the inevitable complexity of our ethical choices. We should also remember that skilful states aren't necessarily pleasurable; we might suffer **shame** (either from our own, internal 'moral compass' or through comparing our actions with those of people whom we look up to) when we fall short of our ideals.

We need to **work consciously** at shifting our behaviour in the direction of greater skilfulness. Remembering that both physical actions and speech originally stem from our minds, the traditional teaching of the **Four Right Efforts** describes this in terms of (1) eradicating and (2) preventing unskilful mental states, and (3) developing and (4) maintaining skilful ones. This area is covered in detail in the 'Vision and Transformation' course. Of course, this work of sharpening our moral sensibility is unlikely to be fully supported by the social groupings that we belong to, a fact which will make the task much harder. This is why we need the support of those who are trying to do the same; in other words, our spiritual friends within the sangha.

As we know, the meditation practice most associated with positive emotion is the Metta Bhavana. Perhaps you could consider this question – does using the term 'skilful intention' instead of 'positive emotion' suggest a different emphasis to this practice?

3. **Spiritual receptivity (dharmic responsiveness):** The stage of spiritual receptivity is woven through our practice of the other four dimensions. It involves making sure that we are relaxed (which can be a considerable challenge in our culture!) and **open**. We can be open in many different ways – to our own internal experience, to other people, the natural world, the arts and, ultimately, the truths of reality as taught to us by the Buddha.

We need to balance periods of **willing** (as in the previous 2 dimensions of integration and skilful action) with responding – activity with passivity. This is why we can also call this dimension ‘dharmic responsiveness’. We can respond to **people** because we like them, or simply because we’re attracted to their particular, individual humanity. We might also admire somebody, perhaps when they do something that we see as noble or self-sacrificing.

We can also respond to **art**, in whatever form. It doesn’t matter what sort of art we’re drawn to (it could be fine painting or heavy rock!) – the important thing is simply that we do respond, that the experience ‘opens our heart’. In the same way, many people are moved and inspired by **the natural world**, perhaps ranging from the gentle beauty of a garden to the awesome scale of the ocean or the night sky.

Ironically, even though responsiveness is, in some ways, the opposite of willing, we may need to make a deliberate effort to allow responsiveness to arise. This effort may begin by being clear about just what things in our experience arouse some sort of passion.

A particular practice that is very helpful in cultivating responsiveness is just **doing nothing!** This is a surprisingly difficult practice (if that’s the right word!), and is also the basis of ‘just sitting’ meditation. In this, as Sangharakshita says, we “don’t try to do anything; don’t try not to do anything”. In this way, we can “surround everything with space – this is the essence of spiritual receptivity” (In Subhuti’s words).

4. **Spiritual Death (vision):** What we’re describing here is dramatic, even shocking! Obviously, we’re not talking about death in the literal sense, but rather in the sense of the giving up of our cherishing of ‘self’. There’s another important inter-dependence here – without **skilful action** the experience of spiritual death will just be too threatening.

In the stages of integration and skilful action we have been harnessing the energy of our volition (*karma*), but these stages alone can’t bring us all the way to Awakening. The reason for this is simple – our ideas of ‘self’, which are entirely inaccurate, badly distort our spiritual vision, like thick layers of dirt on an otherwise perfectly clear window. As we become more ‘selfless’ (think carefully about what this word means!), we can see that our idea of ‘self’ is a construction – i.e. the most significant **delusion** of all. For this reason, we can say that spiritual life is always a movement away from self and towards selflessness.

We have a strongly-deluded notion of 'self' because our brains organise the data they gather from our senses in terms of an apparently clear separation between 'in here' and 'out there'. In more traditional terms, we automatically separate our every experience into what our senses 'grasp' and something internal that we might call the 'grasper'. To use another traditional Buddhist view, there are four aspects to the problem of 'self', namely:

1. We are attached to it;
2. we strongly defend it;
3. it causes us to fail to understand how things really are, and
4. despite this, we still think that we understand!

In the stage of spiritual death, therefore, we try to give up on 'self' altogether – even to give up on on a better self that we may have developed through our efforts in ethics and meditation. In specifically Buddhist terms, we need to die spiritually in order to enter into Reality. Although we shan't manage this immediately and entirely, the more we do let go of self, the more Reality can manifest in us. Dayanandi makes the point that there is an important connection between spiritual death, as described here, and Perfect Vision, which you might have encountered in the 'Vision and Transformation' course. "When we really see something, really understand it and know it deeply, we are changed by it". She warns that, without this profound change, 'spiritual life' can become nothing more than a more refined sort of selfishness.

In practical terms, we know that we're making progress in this stage if we recognise that we're a little less selfish (in the everyday sense of the word) now than we once were. As Dayanandi makes clear, "This is the only test" – there's actually nothing more technical to it! There are also tangible activities that help us towards spiritual death: apology and confession when we recognise that we've acted unskillfully, and a readiness to let go of expectations that haven't been (or can't be) fulfilled.

In the end, giving up self involves letting go of even the concepts that have been conceptually useful. Buddhist thought speaks of **Emptiness** (*sunyatā*) as the ultimate reality. This does not mean, as is sometimes thought, that 'nothing exists' – it's more that the mental constructs from which we build our private 'mind-made world' don't really have any ultimate reality. This is what is being said in the famous and mysterious Heart Sutra and other scriptures from what we collectively call the Perfection of Wisdom sutras.

5. **Spiritual Rebirth (transformation):** This stage can be described as the experience of something 'beyond us' breaking into us – as Maitreyabandhu describes it, "a supra-personal, non-egoistic energy". Through surrendering to this energy we are completely transformed. In fact, the ultimate manifestation of this transformation is complete awakening from the ego-based poisons of greed, hatred and delusion – in other words, Awakening itself. We've already seen that self-clinging is the

very root of our delusion; it's like a veil in front of our eyes. If this veil were completely removed, we'd see Reality naturally and directly. In the meantime, though, the degree to which we are transformed is dependent on the degree to which we've 'let go' of self in the stage of spiritual death.

The unfolding of Reality has the rich flavour of magic and imagination, but without the very dangerous literalism of *eternalist* religion (or the lack of imagination that often accompanies materialistic *nihilism*). These terms refer to the extreme positions that people very commonly adopt in relation to the whole 'spiritual' dimension of life – including the associated questions of 'the meaning of life' and 'what happens after death?' Put briefly, **eternalism** relies on the persistence of the 'soul' in some form of afterlife, and also tends to be associated with belief in a creator god. At the opposite end of the spectrum, nihilism tends to believe that there is nothing beyond our physical organism; the intricacies of our minds can be described entirely in terms of brain function, and death is a complete ending – "the lights go out and that's all", so to speak. These positions are polar opposites and, as intimated above, both are very problematic. Eternalism (as embodied in theistic religion) can all too easily tend towards literalism and zealotry, with disastrous consequences that are all too easy to witness, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nihilism is often accompanied by the wasteful, life-denying effects of materialism and consumerism, along with an undirected urge to live life to the full before death brings everything to an end – obviously, also a powerful framework of belief in our time.

In the face of these polarities, Buddhism regards both as a delusive 'wrong view' and offers an important and distinctive alternative – the teaching of the Middle Way. You'll already have met the idea of this on your Buddhism Foundation course, and looked at more 'mundane' examples of how it can be applied. In its highest form, the Middle Way doctrine teaches us that there is a 'transcendental' dimension to our experience (in other words, our connection with the *dharma-niyāma*), but this can be seen, like everything else, in terms of dependent arising & cessation. The transcendental is real (in contradiction of a strictly nihilist position), but it doesn't require belief in either a creator god or an enduring 'soul' (as in the eternalist view).

This brings us back to our continuing work to exploit the energy of the *karma-niyāma*. If we can set up the right **conditions** as a result of that work the *dharma-niyāma* will unfold spontaneously for us, but it can't be forced. We can use the metaphor of gardening – practising the dimensions of integration, skilful action, dharmic receptivity and spiritual death is like preparing the soil, sowing seeds, weeding (and standing back to take in the garden!), all at a karmic level. What we can't do is to force the flowers to grow and open. Alternatively, the metaphors of 'cleaning the window' (already hinted at) or the sun 'coming out' when the clouds roll away might give us poetic hints as to the mysterious relationship between spiritual death and spiritual rebirth.

There's a vital role for **faith** in opening us up to spiritual rebirth. It's essential that each of us finds their own 'transcendental object' – a symbol, of whatever kind, that comes from the mundane world (the only world to which we presently have access), but suggests the qualities of the transcendental. To use a metaphor for this, space probes use the gravitational force of the planets that they pass in order to shoot faster and further across interplanetary space – their outward momentum comes from the very force that would normally hold them back. For Buddhists, the greatest transcendental object is the figure of the Buddha himself. He was a real human being, subject to the pains of mundane life like ourselves, but we also believe that he fully connected with Reality. He's therefore our gateway to an imaginative world of myth, including the archetypal Buddhas and bodhisattvas that are powerfully symbolic embodiments of the qualities of a mind unfettered by delusion: compassion, wisdom, energy and others. By relating to these archetypes as 'transcendental objects' we can move closer, within in our present mundane limitations, to those idealised qualities to which we might ultimately aspire.

Of course, the stage of spiritual rebirth doesn't stand alone (all things are interconnected, after all!). We've already noted that true freedom can't be reached until we've 'let go' in the stage of **spiritual death**. In addition, it's important to understand that without **integration** we will tend to want to appropriate any visionary experiences that might arise as part of spiritual rebirth. At worst, we may then indulge in 'spiritual bragging', as Maitreyabandhu describes it. If our integration is well-developed, and we also have skilful intentions, we can successfully recognise the energy associated with spiritual rebirth as 'supra-personal' and 'non-egoistic'.

These, then, are the Five Dimensions of Dharma Life. They are a hugely valuable toolkit, drawing directly from the Buddha's teaching, but brought to us with great clarity by Sangharakshita. In the seminar in which he originally introduced the five stages, he made a very bold statement as to just how important the model is:

"This is your spiritual life and this is your spiritual practice. These are the things with which you are basically concerned. You can, as it were, forget about all the other formulations, all about the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path. On the practical side, this is all that you really need or all that you really need to think in terms of. Whatsoever has been said by all the different Buddhist teachers in the course of several hundred years of development is all really contained in this in principle."

We can also see the Five Stages in a more simplified and even more practical light – for example, Sangharakshita has rendered them as a set of five 'precepts':

1. Keep up the effort to be mindful and aware, and be as 'together' as possible, as **integrated** as possible.
2. Remain in **as positive a mental state** as you possibly can.
3. Do not lose sight of your **ultimate goal** at any time.
4. Whatever you've realised or discovered or seen on **the highest level of your being**, apply it at any time to every level of your being.
5. Do your best for other people, do what you can to help people.

To try to put the Five Stages in their proper context – the quest for Enlightenment itself – we'll finish with an inspiring passage from Dayanandi:

"Whatever it is, much of our practice of the Dharma is geared towards us helping see reality as it really is. Everything unfolds from here. It is the heart of transformation. Accepting how things are, learning how to slow down, open our eyes, ears and heart, so we can receive our experience without wanting to control or change it. Everything comes from there - all compassion and wisdom. We very gradually, in glimpses and heightened moments, learn to see the world clearly, as it is, as an unending flow of interconnected experience. We see that we cannot ever have or own anything. It all slips through our fingers. It cannot be held back, it is impermanent, elusive and all the more beautiful for that. It's like a wild animal, free and not to be caged, glorious in its naturalness."

**Additional resources:** for more on the Five Dimensions (or stages) individually, we recommend:

1. **Dayanandi's** 2011 Sangha Night series 'The five great stages of the spiritual path' - on the MBC web site (<https://www.manchesterbuddhistcentre.org.uk/> – go to the 'Talks' page, then add the tag 'Dayanandi' and click 'Submit'). There are also links to short, edited PDF versions of each talk.
2. **Maitreyabandhu's** book 'The Journey and the Guide' (Windhorse Publications, 2015)
3. **Subhuti's** 2013 series of talks at Padmaloka retreat centre: (<http://www.padmaloaka.org.uk/resources/mp3-talks> for a series of 9 talks of roughly an hour each – search backwards in the chronological list until you come to June 2013). These recordings are also on Free Buddhist Audio (<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com>) ; try searching on 'five aspects of dharma life'.