

Week 5 – Akshobhya & Amitabha

Buddhism Level 2 – Buddhist Wisdom – symbolic Dharma

RESOURCES REQUIRED

Two small tables, covered with Red & blue cloths

Vajra & “lotus”

“Quality cards” printed out on & cut up, in pairs, but mixed up within pairs.

Progressive nidana “story” from last week

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Gain a sense of how to relate to, to “place” the Jinas, in terms of archetypal symbolism

Gain an appreciation for the principle of correspondences – between qualities; mundane & transcendental

Gain a feeling for the figures of Amitabha & Akshobhya

MEDITATION (10 MINS)

usual lead in

then gather attention around breath

After while, note quality of effort; is it spacious; is it a request or are you making demands on how your experience should be? Can you maintain a steady effort of awareness while still remaining open to what’s happening?

INTRODUCTION TO SESSION

Home practice review (10 mins) – in threes

How did you find home practice?

Do you have any examples of a more creative response to suffering or frustration? Or notice any different kind of response in meditation?

Previous class Review (10 mins)

Exercise

Hand out progressive nidana revision sheets in random order, one to each person. Ask them to arrange themselves around the room in the correct order.

Read out the description from the story of any tricky stages so people can work out where to go.

Plenary

Together, try to come up with salient points from previous session.

Difference between cyclic & progressive conditionality

Point of intersection of wheel & spiral

How does faith arise in dependence upon dukkha? Letting go of hope for fulfillment in samsara, of things turning out how you want them; making requests rather than demands; lying back in the icy couch of experience.

Principle of samadhi -> insight; irreversibility

Plenary (10 mins)

ARCHETYPAL BUDDHAS

Buddhism addresses the whole of the individual: rational & emotional, conscious & unconscious, cognitive & intuitive

When reason and emotion come together one has **Imagination**. Imagination perceives images or archetypes which are often encountered in dreams, myths, symbols and legends:

- Lord of the Rings
- Star Wars

Exploring the world of Myth & Symbol: This is *not* a realm where there are fully defined meanings.

*The imaginal faculty is, in reality, the man himself, because when one truly perceives an image one perceives it with the whole of oneself, or with one's whole being. When one truly perceives an image, therefore, one is transported to the world to which that image belongs and becomes, if only for the time being an inhabitant of that world. In other words, truly to perceive an image means to become an image, so that when one speaks of the imagination, or the imaginal faculty, what one is really speaking of is **image perceiving image**.*

Sangharakshita

Some part of us "lives" in the archetypal dimension all the time:

When we are in the dream state, we exist, one might say, in the dream realm. But what happens when we wake up? We are not conscious of the dream state, but has that dream state ceased to exist? Are not those emotions we experienced in the dream state continuing until we descend into the dream state again? Isn't it like a sort of subterranean river that we descend into from time to time through a hole in the ground. It is flowing there all the time [whether you are in it or not]. So, in a sense, you are all the time living in that dream realm. You've only got to extend that to the realm of archetypal experience. You are, in a sense, existing in the realm of archetypal reality all the time.

Sangharakshita

Could say that archetypal symbols govern our life.

Give us sense of meaning & place in world – structure our world

Exercise in threes

Think of a book or film that has particularly moved you. Is there an archetypal element or character in there that carries significance for you?

Exercise: Superheroes

A bit of a game, don't think too logically about it!

- Think of a good friend
- Think of a few of their strong qualities that you admire
- Now exaggerate one or two of those qualities: if they were a superhero, what sort of superhero would they be?
- What would they be called?
- What would they be wearing? What colour would they be? Try to see it rather than work it out.
- What would they be doing with their hands (if they have hands!)?
- What would their posture be?
- If they had an animal with them, what would it be?

ENTERING THE MANDALA: AKSHOBHYA & AMITABHA

Exercise

"If this Buddha were a x, what sort of x would he be"

Start off just with two colours – the cloths on the tables (aligned E&W)

Hand out pairs of quality cards to pairs of people in the numbered order: ie "quality", emblem, element etc.

We're going to use our own intuition to see which qualities belong to which Buddha.

NB. Not completely neat & tidy.

Let each pair read out their cards, & place them on the cloths according to their own intuition, in collaboration & discussion with group.

Give hints as necessary eg for animal, look at the names (elephant – imperturbable) ; for realm look at poison

Should lead to plenty of discussion

Draw out particularly connection between wisdom & poison; & demonstrate mudras.

NB need to lead it in exploratory fashion, not look so much to get the right answer, as to use it as an opportunity for interesting discussion and let people feel safe to talk about their vague intuitions. Try not to give away the "answer" during the course of the discussion.

PRINCIPLE OF CORRESPONDENCES

Try (somehow!) to explain the principle of correspondences. We've been doing it.

Tantric Buddhism developed a complex system of correlations which associated mundane things with transcendental qualities. By doing this, the Tantra achieved two aims. Firstly it reminded its practitioners that attaining Enlightenment does not mean going off to some other world. Rather we just have to bring about a radical change in our approach to our present experience. Instead of seeing mundane things as hindrances to be avoided, we recognize that, seen aright, 'this very place is the lotus paradise, this very body the Buddha'. Secondly, through correlating mundane and transcendental, the Tantra made it possible for anything mundane to serve as a reminder of Reality.

Vessantara, Meeting the Buddhas

Exercise (in threes)

Discuss whether you felt any affinity to either of the two Buddhas or their poisons (greed & hatred)

HOME PRACTICE

Colour in line drawing of Buddhas if you wish.

Notice your emotional response to colours; in noticing colours red & blue see if you can bring to mind the Buddhas Akshobya & Amitabha, or something of their qualities.

Maybe notice & reflect on the affinities between different qualities that we've talked about (eg. clarity & hatred, fire and love, objectivity & imperturbability, sunset & peacocks!)

FURTHER READING

The Symbolism of the five Buddhas 'Male & Female', Sangharakshita, CD 110 or in *The Creative Symbols of Tantric Buddhism*

Meeting the Buddhas, Vessantara, Windhorse (Part Two) – rich descriptions, and an invaluable reference work for Buddhist symbolism.

The Mandala of the Five Buddhas, Vessantara, Windhorse – a shortened version of the above.