

Contents

Introduction & Prospect	3
Section 1. <i>A System of Meditation</i> – an overview	5
in outline	
what is meditation?	6
working effectively with temporal and spatial models	7
– regular and irregular steps	9
– the five basic methods of meditation	10
– how to correlate the two different systems?	11
– balanced effort	
Section 2. The Four Stages of <i>A System of Meditation</i>	13
integration, positive emotion, spiritual death, spiritual rebirth	
just sitting	27
Section 3. <i>A System of Meditation</i> contextualised	29
the five principal stages of spiritual life	30
– stage of vision	31
– stage of transformation	32
– stage of compassionate activity	33
traditional sources	35
Section 4. Related issues	39
mula yogas	
vipashyana practice	
other practices?	40
‘pure awareness’ practice	40
– Bodhisattvahood in time and space; Buddhahood in eternity	42
Appendices:	
1. <i>A System of Meditation</i>	45
2. <i>Meditation – the expanding consciousness (excerpt);</i>	55
3. Precious Garland Seminar (excerpt)	60
4. Nature of ‘Sadhana’ and its relationship to Going for Refuge in the Context of Ordination into the Western Buddhist Order	63
5. Notes on a forum on meditation between members of the Preceptors’ College and the Vajraloka teaching team, June 2000	66

MEDITATION

Here perpetual incense burns
The heart to meditation turns,
And all delights and passions spurns.

A thousand brilliant hues arise,
More lovely than the evening skies,
And pictures paint before our eyes.

All the spirit's storm and stress
Is stilled into a nothingness,
And healing powers descend and bless.

Refreshed, we rise and turn again
To mingle with this world of pain,
As on roses falls the rain.

Sangharakshita 1947

Introduction

This booklet is being written 25 years after Sangharakshita's lecture *A System of Meditation*¹ was given during the 1978 Order Convention, just prior to the 10th anniversary of the founding of the Order. My purpose is fairly modest: to contribute to this year's Order convention by encouraging Order members to look afresh at Sangharakshita's *A System of Meditation*. To this end I have revisited the original lecture and drawn together other teaching of his relevant to meditation, mainly quoting or paraphrasing from his lectures, seminars and writing. As a result there is an inevitable mixture of literary styles - something the reader will have to tolerate with good humour. I am indebted to the considerable work of the Spoken Word editors as well as Silabhadra's transcribing work.

One of my concerns is to represent Sangharakshita accurately; I don't regard myself as saying anything new or which the vast majority of us will not probably have heard already. However, I am assuming that a significant proportion of us may not have anything other than a passing familiarity with *A System of Meditation*, which many will have encountered in edited form in *A Guide to the Buddhist Path*. For those people in particular, I aim to highlight a good number, but not all, of the basic points. Of course it is impossible to treat the subject comprehensively: I cannot present everything that Sangharakshita has written about or said on all the different aspects of meditation touched on in the original lecture. This is certainly not the definitive last word on the subject. There are bound to be a number of loose ends, which may seem rather unsatisfactory to some readers. Whilst I anticipate speakers on the Convention presenting their own particular take on how to engage creatively with *A System of Meditation*, my purpose is less ambitious. Here I want to stimulate you, the reader, to examine one of Sangharakshita's more important teachings with a view to gaining even greater clarity, perspective and confidence in it, and renewed enthusiasm to explore and practise it.

For some time there has been discussion within the Order and Movement about our

¹ held at Vinehall School, Robertsbridge, Sussex, UK, on March 29th 1978, Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*, Lecture No. 135 in the Dharmachakra catalogue, also available from www.dharmatranscripts.com

practice of meditation, and questioning whether it is based on an effective model. In my view Sangharakshita's *A System of Meditation* is more flexible, more inclusive and less prescriptive than some credit it with being. I have faith that a great deal can be accomplished by using it creatively. Where there is scope for improving on it, I propose it is mainly for practitioners with particular interests to explore in greater depth some of the System's implications. Beyond that I believe that for many of us it is a 'simple' matter of rising to the challenge of actually putting it into practice.

I've enjoyed the opportunity to write this inasmuch as my own understanding of the topic has become much clearer; I've also had the good fortune to discuss with Sangharakshita some points that I've wished to clarify. I am grateful to Kamalashila, Ratnaprabha, Subhuti, Tejananda, Varamitra, Vidyamala, Vidyasuri and Viveka for their contributions to this project.

prospect

Section One explores the general principles informing *A System of Meditation*, and how to work with it practically. To gain a quick overview of the original lecture, immediately below are relevant excerpts from that lecture which outline the four principal stages of meditation envisaged by this system. (A verbatim transcript of *A System of Meditation* is included in the appendices).

Section Two explores each of these principal stages more fully. The first half of Section Three considers another closely related teaching of Sangharakshita's which sheds light on the principles of the system; the second half establishes the system's traditional antecedents in early Buddhist teaching. The final section goes on to explore some questions that arise when relating this system to other forms of traditional practice.

Unfortunately due to pressure of time it's been impossible to identify the page numbers of all quotes from Unedited Seminars for the references in the footnotes.

Table 1: Sangharakshita's *A System of Meditation*

STAGE	Awareness & Integration	Positive Emotion	Spiritual Death	Spiritual Rebirth
PRACTICE (S)	Mindfulness of Breathing Just Sitting	<i>mettabhavana</i> <i>karunabhavana</i> <i>muditabhavana</i> <i>upeksabhavana</i> Just Sitting	Recollection of the Six Elements Recollection of Impermanence Recollection of Death Contemplating Conditionality: the 24 <i>nidana</i> chain Reflection on <i>sunyata</i> Just Sitting	Visualisation & mantra recitation Just Sitting

Section 1. *A System of Meditation* – an overview

A System of Meditation – In outline

“...[I’m going to] take up the different methods of meditation current in the Order, current in the Movement, and see in what way they link up into a series. In fact, into what I have called – perhaps a trifle ambitiously – a system. That is to say, an organic system, a living system, not a dead, mechanical system put together in an artificial manner. ... [We need to be] clear as to how, if at all, they [the meditation practices] are related, how they link up, how they are interconnected. ... What we need is a progressive arrangement; an arrangement that takes us forward step by step and stage by stage, and it’s *this* that we are concerned with now. We are concerned with the methods of meditation as a definite progressive sequence, a cumulative sequence.

... [We] see there are four great stages, four great turning points. The first great stage is the stage of *integration*. That’s the first thing you must do in connection with meditation – integrate. Integration is achieved mainly through Mindfulness of Breathing, as well as with the help of mindfulness and awareness in general. Here, in this stage, we develop an integrated self.

... Then secondly, the stage of *emotional positivity*. This is achieved mainly through the development of Metta, Karuna, Mudita, and so on. Here, the integrated self is raised to a higher, more refined, at the same time more powerful level.

... Thirdly, the stage of *spiritual death*, achieved mainly through the Recollection of the Six Elements, as well as through the Recollection of Impermanence, Death, and so on, as well as the *sunyata* meditations. Here that refined self is destroyed, or, rather is seen through, and we experience *sunyata*.

... Fourthly, comes the stage of *spiritual rebirth*; and this is achieved through the visualisation and mantra recitation practice; abstract visualisation, as we may call it, also helps; that is to say the visualisation of geometric forms and letters.

[Lastly] ... one must be careful that [all] this conscious effort [exerted in these other meditations] does not become too willed, even too wilful, and in order to counteract this tendency, in order to guard against this possibility, we can practise *just sitting*. In other words, practise just sitting in between the other methods, ... [i.e.] taking hold of / letting go, ... action / non-action. In this way we achieve a perfectly balanced practice of meditation, a perfectly balanced spiritual life, and in this way the whole system of meditation becomes complete.”²

² Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

what is meditation?

To summarise the outline of Sangharakshita's lecture given above, we could say that meditation starts with the process of cultivating awareness or mindfulness, and consequently becoming more integrated. On the basis of this, we develop positive emotion. Then the happy, healthy, mature human being who has come about as a result of meditating in this way has to 'die spiritually', and thereby enters the phase of spiritual rebirth. *A System of Meditation* describes how to progress systematically in meditation from early beginnings to a more fully developed and complete practice. It describes the key elements that can progressively unfold and be cultivated.

More generally speaking, meditation is the subjective way of raising, so to speak, our level of consciousness, which we do by working directly on our mind itself.³ There may be a temptation to think of meditation in terms of technique. Even though technique very definitely has to be learned and mastered, meditation is not so much a science or discipline as an art, and in this art, as in all others, it is inner experience rather than technique which is all-important. If we grab at the end result without being willing to engage with the actual process, we will never get it. It is even possible to master all the techniques of meditation – at least of concentration – and to be able to go through all the exercises, but to remain very far from the real spirit of meditation.⁴

Sangharakshita speculates that this was, effectively, what the Buddha-to-be realised, when he recollected his childhood experience of spontaneously entering into the first *dhyana*, and understood that this was the key to Enlightenment. It is otherwise difficult to understand what such an elementary spiritual experience might signify to one who had apparently entered into such heights as the formless *dhyanas* under his former teachers, without feeling that he had attained the goal to which he aspired. What he realised was that his previous mastery of meditation had been forced, and that this was why it had not achieved his end. Progress had been made, but only part of Siddhartha had been involved in that progress – because it had been

³ Sangharakshita, *Human Enlightenment*, 'What Meditation Really Is', Windhorse, 1980, p. 37

⁴ after Sangharakshita, No. 33 *'Meditation – the expanding consciousness'*, dharmatranscripts

produced through sheer willpower. It was not so much the first *dhyana* in itself that was the answer, but the natural manner in which he had entered into that state. The answer was to allow a natural unfolding of the whole being to take place.⁵

Our motivation in meditation is crucial: why do we want to do it? Meditation only really works if we want to change, and to the extent to which we embrace that change. Our motive also plays a crucial role in how we experience the results of practice. For example, if what we really want is pleasure, happiness or bliss, then our ensuing experience will mirror this motive. Essential as these are to Buddhist meditation, such positive experience will be short-lived if it has no genuine foundation in commitment to an evolution in our whole character and outlook: our philosophy of life.⁶ In meditation we choose to create "an uninterrupted flow of skilful mental states"⁷ – whether we are sitting, walking, standing, or doing anything else – with a view to our becoming increasingly enlightened. As such meditation involves much more than what we think of as 'sitting on the cushion'. In fact, what we do outside of actual sitting practice goes hand-in-hand with what we do on the cushion, the one affecting the other; we set off on the wrong foot if we compartmentalise our meditation practice(s) off from the rest of our life's activities. The states of mind that we experience through our actions during the day, and during the course of our life in general, will be the ones we have to address in our meditation, whatever they are. If we are distracted, unreflective, self-indulgent and reactive in our daily life, then that is what we need to work with; we should not *force* ourselves into the opposite direction in our meditation. If we do, we may even get some short-lived results. But this is not the Buddhist way which comes from the wish to bring about a total transformation of our being.⁸

⁵ after Sangharakshita, from an early version of an edited manuscript of a seminar on the *Satipatthana Sutta* and Questions and Answers based on the *Satipatthana sutta*; the final version of this manuscript is published as Sangharakshita, *Living with Awareness*, Windhorse, Aug. 2003. Hence page numbers unfortunately are not available.

⁶ *ibid.*,

⁷ Sangharakshita, *Door of Liberation*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, p. 272

⁸ Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

working effectively with temporal and spatial models

Why did Sangharakshita go to the trouble of formulating a system at all? It's worth noting that the title '*A System of Meditation*' specifically indicates this is 'A' system – that is, one of potentially a number. In other words, Sangharakshita is not suggesting that this is the only system of meditation possible. In the original lecture, he explained: “[I’m going to] take up the different methods of meditation current in the Order, current in the Movement, and see in what way they link up into a series. I don't propose to take up absolutely all the methods of meditation that are current amongst us, but certainly all the more important and widespread and well-known ones. And in this way I hope to be able to give an outline of the system of meditation. The details you should be able to fill in for yourselves from your own experience. ... All of you have practised some of them, and some of you might have practised all of them. But you might not be very clear as to how, if at all, they are related, how they link up, how they are interconnected. ... What we need is a progressive arrangement; an arrangement that takes us forward step by step and stage by stage, and it's *this* that we are concerned with now. We are concerned with the methods of meditation as a definite progressive sequence, a cumulative sequence.”⁹

Sangharakshita's 'system' *describes* the relationship between 'parts' of a seamless whole: the dynamic of relations between particularly salient features of the meditator's evolving experience. Importantly, the nature of what is being described is organic: it is alive and not inert or mechanical. A system is in effect a model or map of living reality, often using or implying an image to describe its complexity. Here the system describes a temporal progression – a cumulative sequence of stages through time – of the meditator changing, evolving and transforming. How we engage with these descriptions is crucial. “The problem is more in our own minds than in the models we use: it is our tendency to take ideas literally: to take models of things for the things themselves, so to speak; to take the picture of what is going on for what is going on. Even with an aspect of ourselves that is clearly observable, the physical body, the reality of its workings is almost impossible to envisage ...”¹⁰

⁹ Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

¹⁰ Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript on the

To work effectively with Sangharakshita's *A System of Meditation*, we need an attitude of creative flexibility that intuits the spirit intended. Although systems lend themselves to being tabulated, a table puts experience in boxes, correlating one labelled box with another. Consequently we can all too easily succumb to the temptation of interpreting a table with an over-literal mind. Rigid formalism squeezes the life out of what is intended to convey a fluid interdependence between connecting 'parts' of a functioning organic entity – ourselves.

To help to make *A System of Meditation* as relevant as possible to us Sangharakshita has used contemporary English terms to describe the cumulative sequence of progressive stages in meditative experience. This is reminiscent of the new terms he devised to describe the *dhyanas*: integration, inspiration, permeation and radiation. Sangharakshita explained why has he done this: “We have devised fresh English names perhaps more truly communicative, meaningful and significant ... than the original Pali and Sanskrit terms. ... This is the sort of way in which we have been trying to 'naturalise' Buddhism; not to speak ... in an abstract, analytical, psychological sort of way, not even so much nowadays in terms of poetic metaphor, but in this very plain, straightforward way.”¹¹ One downside of using English terms in this way is that it may not be immediately obvious to what extent they are based in traditional Buddhist teaching. However, *A System of Meditation* is firmly based in the Buddhist tradition, such as the Five Paths, as I show in the second half of Section Three.

In his lecture Sangharakshita deliberately chooses a *temporal* model, speaking of *A System of Meditation* in terms of progressing through time, as it were, from one stage of a task to the next. We can liken this to following a cooking recipe – the dish we're making progressively taking on new forms in the process of transformation from raw ingredients to completion. The advantage of this temporal way of looking at meditation is that it helps us to know what to do next: not only can we get perspective of where we are now in the process and what we need to do to develop our current experience more fully, we can also anticipate what is the next stage in our practice. In order to bring about that next stage

Satipatthana Sutta (see footnote 5)

¹¹ Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

we can either take up a new practice, or look for a new way with which to engage with our existing practice(s).

The last point is important to a fuller understanding of this System. What is clearer in later exposition is Sangharakshita's distinction between the four key stages (of integration, positive emotion, spiritual death and rebirth), and the practices he recommends as being the best one(s) to develop those stages. When he refers to these practices as *key practices* in the lecture, he does *not* mean that they are the only way to develop these stages. For example, integration is not one and the same thing as the mindfulness of breathing practice. The latter is helpful, and in Sangharakshita's view a very important practice in developing integration, but it is not the only way; other practices can achieve this too. The same can be said of the *metta bhavana* as a way to achieve positive emotion, and so on.¹²

Therefore, contrary to a common misunderstanding of what Sangharakshita is saying, to progress through the four stages does *not* necessitate doing all the practices mentioned in the lecture. In principle, developing the four distinct stages of meditation can be achieved using any one (or more) of the practices Sangharakshita mentions, as summarised in Table 2, or indeed any other genuinely effective meditation practice. The mindfulness of breathing or the six element practice, for example, could be used as a the sole means of progressing through all these four stages. But to do so the practice(s) would have to be developed quite consciously in ways in which the standard beginners' version of the practice is not described.¹³ It is clear that in the case of the *anapana-sati* method there is a well-developed tradition, based on the Pali suttas¹⁴, which does indeed develop very methodically in such a way as to enable the practitioner to progress, in effect, through the four stages. Whilst such traditional approaches map out a complete path in their own terms, if we use Sangharakshita's system as a means of

interpreting what is most essential in them, this will help us to make them particularly effective tools.

Table 2: A System of Meditation: practices with stages of meditation

Mindfulness of Breathing

- *Awareness*
- *Positive Emotion*
- *Spiritual Death*
- *Spiritual Rebirth*

Metta bhavana

- *Awareness*
- *Positive Emotion*
- *Spiritual Death*
- *Spiritual Rebirth*

Recollection of the Six Elements, Recollection of Impermanence, Recollection of Death, Contemplating Conditionality: the 24 *nidana* chain, Reflection on sunyata

- *Awareness*
- *Positive Emotion*
- *Spiritual Death*
- *Spiritual Rebirth*

Visualisation & mantra recitation

- *Awareness*
- *Positive Emotion*
- *Spiritual Death*
- *Spiritual Rebirth*

¹² after Sangharashita, unrecorded seminar, November 2002

¹³ *ibid.*,

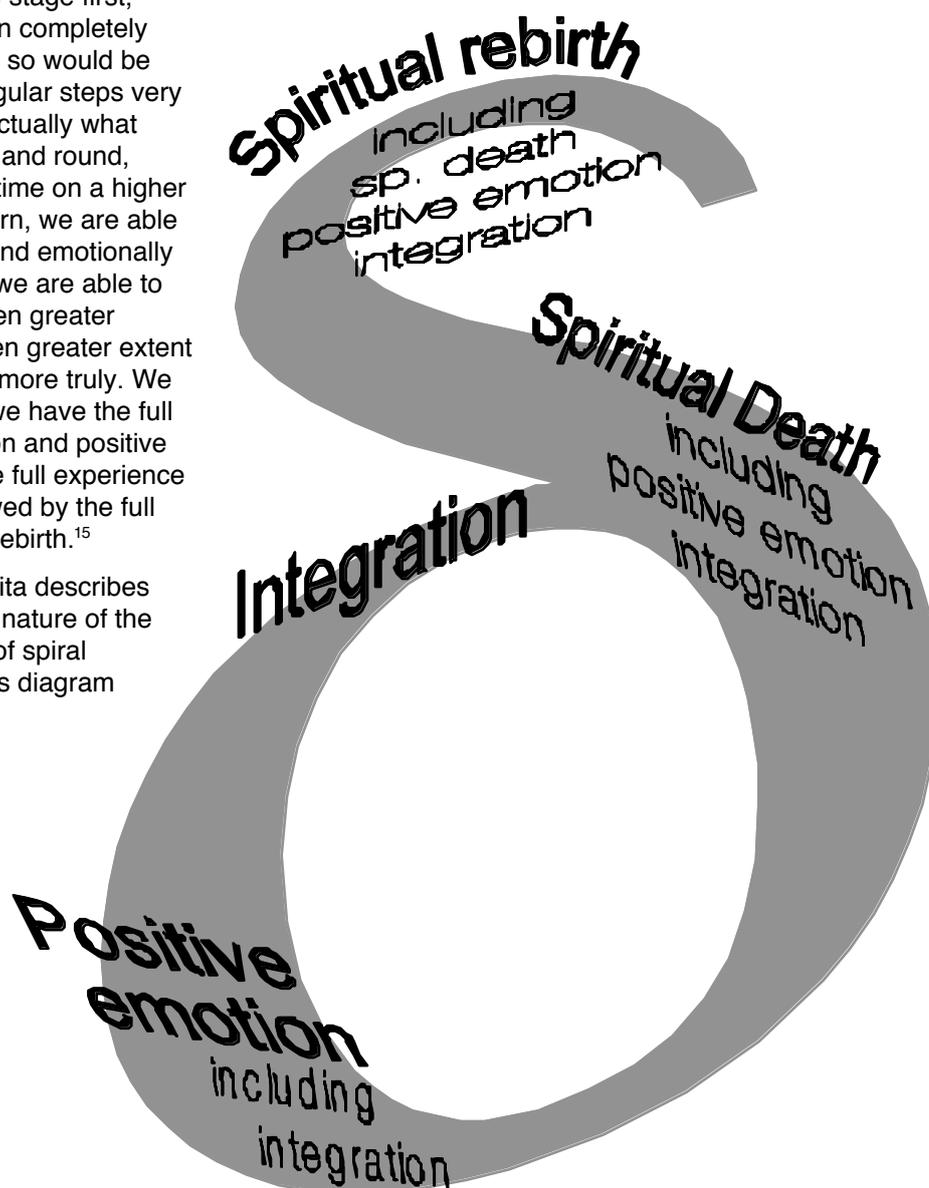
¹⁴ see *Satipatthana Sutta*, MN. 10; DN 22. *Anapana-sati Sutta*, MN. 118; Rosenberg, *Breath by Breath*, Shambala, 1998; Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Mindfulness with Breathing*, Wisdom, 1996, Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, Rider, 1980

– regular and irregular steps

It would be easy to conclude that we can only move on from an earlier to a later stage – as say, from Integration to Positive Emotion – once the earlier is fully developed. But how would we know when that was? Fortunately this is only theoretical because spiritual life is not schematic but governed by spiral conditionality. One of the characteristics of a spiral is that it traverses the same ground, so to speak, again and again, but each time at a higher level. As we practise *shamatha* meditation, we have some experience, let's say, of the *dhyanas*. Then having become relatively integrated and emotionally positive, we experience spiritual death through the practice of the six element meditation. After experiencing that to some extent, we then experience rebirth through the visualisation practice, but again only to some extent.

So in actual practice we don't go completely through one stage first, perfecting that, and then completely through the next. To do so would be following the path of regular steps very strictly, but that is not actually what happens. We go round and round, again and again, each time on a higher level: having been reborn, we are able to be more integrated and emotionally positive; consequently we are able to 'die' spiritually to an even greater extent; 'dying' to an even greater extent we're spiritually reborn more truly. We go on in this way until we have the full experience of integration and positive emotion followed by the full experience of spiritual death, followed by the full experience of spiritual rebirth.¹⁵

What Sangharakshita describes above is effectively the nature of the progressive sequence of spiral conditionality, which this diagram attempts to summarize.



¹⁵ after Sangharakshita, *Mitra Retreat 1985*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp. ??

– the five basic methods of meditation

In *A System of Meditation* Sangharakshita explicitly draws out how this system is different to an earlier model that appears in Yogi Chen's *Meditation, Systematic and Practical*.¹⁶ He used this eleven years earlier in 1967 in his lecture, *Meditation – The Expanding Consciousness*¹⁷, given within months of the founding of the FWBO. (See appendix 2, for an extract from the original lecture.) He called this *The Five Basic Methods of Meditation*, each one of the five methods not only developing a positive spiritual quality but also “being the antidote to a particular mental poison.”¹⁸ (See Table 4 below¹⁹).

He states: “the relationship between the methods is, as it were, spatial”²⁰ rather than temporal. “Here you don't, as it were, progress from one method to another; the methods are all, as it were, on the same level, arranged like a sort of pentad”²¹ – similar to his spatial arrangement of the Five Spiritual Faculties.²² Whichever practice we choose to do at one particular time is taken up because we want to develop a particular spiritual quality counteractive to a currently prevailing mental poison. For example, we practise the mindfulness of breathing both to counteract distraction and to develop awareness and concentration; or, we may decide to do the *metta bhavana* both to counteract aversion and to develop loving kindness.

Table 4: The Five Basic Methods of Meditation

<i>Meditation Type</i>	<i>Meditation Method</i>	<i>Counteracts Poison</i>	<i>Develops</i>
<i>Tranquillity</i> (<i>shamatha</i>)	Mindfulness of Breathing	Distraction	mindfulness, awareness, concentration
	<i>metta bhavana</i>	Hatred	<i>metta</i>
<i>Insight</i> (<i>vipashyana</i>)	Contemplation of Impurity or Decay	Craving	Inner peace and freedom
	Six Element Practice	Conceit	clarity regarding nature of self
	Contemplation of Conditionality	Ignorance	wisdom

¹⁶ C.M. Chen, *Meditation, Systematic and Practical*, published privately, 1980, p.121

¹⁷ Lecture No. 33, Dharmachakra, or dharmatranscripts. See also Sangharakshita, *What is the Dharma*, Ch. 11, *The Threefold Path: Meditation*, Windhorse 1998, pp. 181 – 200; and Sangharakshita, *A Guide to the Buddhist Path – The Five Basic Methods of Meditation*, Windhorse 1996, pp. 151 – 154

¹⁸ Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

¹⁹ after Kamalashila, *Meditation – The Buddhist Way of Tranquillity and Insight*, Windhorse 1999, pp. 191ff - this table is not an exact copy of Kamalashila's but follows the terminology of the original lecture. However there is no contradiction, as Kamalashila's discussion clarifies. See also: Sangharakshita, *A Guide to the Buddhist Path, The Five Basic Methods of Meditation*, Windhorse, 1996, p. 151ff

²⁰ Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

²¹ Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

²² faith (*sraddha*) counterbalancing wisdom (*prajna*), and concentration (*samadhi*) counterbalancing energy (*virya*), (each pair forming, as it were, opposing poles of two lines crossed at right angles), all balanced by mindfulness (*smriti*), (at the centre of the crossed lines). See also last paragraph of Section 3 in this booklet.

– how to correlate the two different systems?

Two different systems using a number of common terms raise obvious questions as to their relationship: to what extent do they complement or contradict one another, and how do we work with both? I have tried to correlate the two systems below in a manner of one-to-one correspondences. But this is not wholly satisfactory since it not only leaves out the stage of Spiritual Rebirth as well as Visualisation and mantra recitation practices, but also the practice(s) of reflecting on *sunyata*. The attempt is Procrustean, falling foul of literalism.

However using both systems side-by-side need not confuse. The two complement one another insofar as one *emphasises* primarily the temporal perspective, the other primarily the spatial. Such a distinction as between temporal and spatial can only be provisional simply because time and space – being the two principal dimensions into which discriminative consciousness (*vijnana*) bifurcates – necessarily go hand-in-hand; each system has both. Sangharakshita introduced the second system to give a different perspective. Consequently we can use each system to examine and work with our experience from a distinct point of view. With two perspectives we can more accurately orientate ourselves in terms of both our current experience, and what we might choose to do next. They also help us decide whether what we are doing now is contributing to our overall progress.

Table 5: The two systems correlated?

Meditation Type	Meditation Method	Counteracts Poison	Develops	
<i>Tranquillity</i> (<i>shamatha</i>)	Mindfulness of Breathing	Distraction	mindfulness, concentration	Awareness & Integration
	<i>metta bhavana</i>	Hatred	<i>metta</i>	Positive Emotion
<i>Insight</i> (<i>vipashyana</i>)	Contemplation of Impurity or Decay Recollection of Impermanence Recollection of Death	Craving	Inner peace and freedom	Spiritual Death
	Six Element Practice	Conceit	clarity regarding nature of self	
	Contemplation of Conditionality	Ignorance	wisdom	

The temporal emphasis of *A System of Meditation* adopts the perspective of an evolving, developing organism. But it is important to understand that the nature of the growth is not a mechanical addition of one part to another, like bricks being stacked to make a wall. Later forms of the organism arise in dependence upon, and are conditioned by, earlier forms – just as an adult’s body grows out of a child’s. Furthermore, what is a dominant feature at one stage of growth may be rather more implicit than overt at another – as for example with a cake’s sugar, eggs and flour before and after being mixed and baked.²³ The qualities developed in an earlier stage of meditation are integral to the development of the later stage(s), and yet in the process of those later stages developing they become radically refined. This means that our understanding of what is involved by way of practice will change, perhaps even very radically, depending on how much we transform ourselves. The challenges of developing integration and positive emotion, for example, will be very different depending on how far we have progressed.

By contrast, the spatial emphasis employed in *The Five Basic Methods of Meditation* encourages a holistic perspective of our minds *at any one moment* in time. To what extent are mindfulness, *metta*, tranquillity, wisdom and a clarity regarding the nature of self present, in contradistinction to distraction, enmity, craving, conceit and ignorance? To use the analogy of a plant, a spatial view gives us an overview of the relationship between all the important factors contributing to the plant’s vitality at any one point in time. The whole plant requires requires a correct balance of water, sunlight, temperature, minerals, pH, etc. Where there is an imbalance, we can act appropriately to redress it.

Sangharakshita seems to have developed an appreciation of the difference between these emphases for the first time in the early fifties. He recounts: “While I listened enthralled, Lama Govinda explained how one took up first one kind of spiritual practice, then another, in accordance with the various needs of one’s developing spiritual life. It was not, however, that on taking up a new practice one

²³ It is interesting to note that the literal translation of *samskrta*, normally translated as ‘conditioned’, is ‘confectured’.

discarded the old practice and put it behind one, so to speak. What one did was add the new practice to the old and incorporate both in a higher unity. In this way one’s meditation or spiritual practice would, over the years, gradually become an ever richer and more complex thing. As Lama Govinda spoke, I had a vision of petal being added to petal, or facet to facet, until one had a thousand-petalled rose or a thousand-faceted crystal ball complete in all its glory. What Lama Govinda was doing, of course, was speaking of meditation or spiritual practice, – indeed, of the spiritual life itself – in terms of the gradual building up of a mandala. In other words, he was speaking of it not only in terms of time but in terms of space. Hitherto I had thought of it as a progression from stage to stage, or level to level. Now I also saw it as unfolding from an ever more truly central point into an ever increasing number of different aspects and dimensions.”²⁴

In *A Survey of Buddhism* Sangharakshita explores a traditional approach to these two perspectives. He makes a distinction between ‘spatio-analytical’, and ‘dynamic-synthetical’ practices; the two acting as complementary approaches to cultivating insight so as to destroy the twofold nature of ignorance (*avidya*). A practice such as ‘analysis of the five *skandhas*’, or recollection of impurity and decay are a good examples of the former. This proceeds by analysing the phenomena of our experience into ever smaller constituent parts; thereby demonstrating that phenomena are always composite, and that nowhere can we find any thing so minute that it cannot be further subdivided. In doing this we come to see how we usually wrongly misconstrue our experience, and more pertinently our sense of self, as possessing a fundamentally unchanging, and self-sustaining essence. By revealing the components of our experience to be a transitory assemblage of evanescent ‘parts’, their unreality, save as mere names, becomes evident. The purpose of the practice is to break our attachment to ‘wholes’.²⁵

The dynamic-synthetical approach to practice explores how every thing arises in dependence on a multiplicity of conditions, thereby demonstrating how nothing lives or

²⁴ Sangharakshita *Facing Mount Kanchenjunga*, Windhorse, 1991, p. 280

²⁵ after Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, Ch. 1 Section 12: The True Nature of Dharmas, Windhorse, 2001, pp. 120 – 5

moves by its own power.²⁶ It is more temporal in character, as in the case of reflecting on the *nidana* sequence where we think in terms of succession of experiences, or components of them: 'in dependence upon A, B arises; when A ceases, B ceases'.²⁷

The two approaches are interconnected: between the parts into which a given object may be analysed, a number of relations exist; similarly, the relations between objects may be analysed into different kinds. The two approaches are ultimately one, pointing beyond themselves to an insight into the nature of things. The six element practice is a good example, inasmuch as we analyse our experience of our self into the constituent 'elements': Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Space and Consciousness. At the same time we acknowledge how each exists in dependence upon the others, and how, when we let go of our attachment and possessiveness toward them, we become free.²⁸

– balanced effort

The complementary nature of these two systems of meditation is integral to the Buddhist approach to spiritual practice in general. Buddhism not only teaches a balanced spiritual ideal, emphasising a number of apparently contrasting qualities such as faith and wisdom, but also recognises that to progress spiritually we have to develop in a balanced way.

For example, when trying to develop the five spiritual faculties, if faith is not balanced by wisdom it can become blind and fanatical. If wisdom is not balanced by faith it can become as dry as dust. If energy is not balanced by concentration and meditation it can become restlessness. And if concentration and meditation are not balanced by vigour, they can degenerate into sloth and torpor.²⁹ So, "this is the nature of following the spiritual path at any stage. If you start by developing

faith, sooner or later you will have to develop the balancing quality, wisdom and vice versa."³⁰

Sangharakshita observes: "Buddhist spiritual life is the balanced life at the highest possible level, in the broadest possible sense. If we're not trying to be balanced then we're not really practising Buddhism. Being Buddhist really means always trying to avoid slipping into extremes, or rather rising above the tendency to slide to one extreme or the other. It means looking for a point of balance, the pivot or fulcrum, as it were, between, or rather above, the extremes. And we do this through the exercise of mindfulness"³¹; mindfulness is itself the balancing agent. It is only through mindfulness that we can balance faith and wisdom, energy and meditative concentration.³² But this is "not to say that mindfulness can be said ever to stand alone in any literal sense. In practice we can't really have any one faculty without also having the others, even if in a lesser degree. They are all present. One of them may predominate, but the fact that it is there at all means that the others are there, at least embryonically. And the spiritual effectiveness with which any faculty operates will depend on the degree to which it is balanced by the others."³³

Similarly we can apply this perspective to both *A System of Meditation* and *The Five Methods of Meditation*, seeking to find a balance of spiritual qualities, avoiding extremes, and recognising the inherent spiral nature of the meditative process.

²⁶ after Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, Ch. 1 Section 12: The True Nature of Dharmas, Windhorse, 2001, pp. 120–5

²⁷ after Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels – Women's Q&A 1985*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp. (3J–180)

²⁸ after Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, Ch. 1 Section 12: The True Nature of Dharmas, Windhorse, 2001, pp. 120–5

²⁹ after Sangharakshita, *Buddhist Life & Work*, Lecture No. 30, Dharmachakra & dharmatranscripts

³⁰ Sangharakshita, *The Bodhisattva Ideal – Wisdom & Compassion in Buddhism*, Windhorse 1999, p.45

³¹ Sangharakshita, *What is the Dharma*, Windhorse 1998, p. 156

³² after Sangharakshita, *Buddhist Life & Work*, Lecture No. 30

³³ Sangharakshita, *What is the Dharma*, Windhorse 1998, p. 156

MEDITATION ON A FLAME

Twisting, writhing, leaping,
 Low curtseying, ne'er the same,
 Burns in its silver cresset,
 Blue-eyed, a tawny flame.

Life from the air receiving,
 Light to the world it gives;
 No winds its pride extinguish:
 Because it yeilds it lives.

Yet drop by drop, in darkness,
 Consumeth that whereon
 Its bright fantastic beauty
 Must feed, or else begone.

For whether fire or water,
 Earth, air, or flower or stone,
 The seen lives from the Unseen,
 The known on the Unknown.

And man, within whose bosom
 Lurks the subtlest flame of all,
 Must feed on The Undying
 Or flicker, fade and fall –

Must feed on The Undying,
 On that which has no name,
 But which the Dark Sage calleth
 'An Ever-Living Flame'.

Sangharakshita

Section 2. A System of Meditation – the four stages

In this section my purpose is simply to introduce each of the stages, picking out some highlights from Sangharakshita's teaching on meditation and the Dharma that seem particularly relevant and significant. Each introduction gives an overview; but of course much more could be said: both in terms of Sangharakshita's thinking in connection with these themes, and in terms of expanding on them in new and interesting ways.

stage 1. integration

Mindfulness, or awareness – effectively synonymous terms – are the alpha and omega of spiritual life: “the first thing you must do in the spiritual life is to be aware of yourself. The next thing, and the next thing after that, is to continue to be aware of yourself.”³⁴ Awareness is integral to all four stages of *A System of Meditation*. Each stage of the system spells out the implications of developing mindful, aware, integration with increasing depth, significance and radical effect. The labels of ‘integration’, ‘emotional positivity’, ‘spiritual death’, and ‘spiritual rebirth’ draw our attention to the particular character of this seamless process as it unfolds.³⁵

With growing awareness and integration comes growing individuality. “Individuality is essentially integrated. ... [The notion of] unintegrated individuality is a contradiction in terms.”³⁶ To the extent we remain unintegrated, “we are just a jumble of conflicting desires, even conflicting selves, loosely tied together with the thread of a name and an address!”³⁷ Our fragmented nature becomes particularly apparent when we sit down to meditate - and can make it all the harder to do so effectively. Knitting the various selves together through mindfulness,

“we overcome conflict and disharmony within ourselves, we get ourselves functioning as a smoothly working whole”³⁸ and build a strengthened sense of continuity. Our different energies, interests, desires do not work against another; because all our energies start working co-operatively, all flowing in effectively the same direction, we can commit ourselves more fully, and thereby progress.³⁹

The far-reaching nature of awareness, and hence integration, is of course spelt out in the teachings of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness of the *Satipatthana Sutta*,⁴⁰ as well as Sangharakshita's Four Dimensions of Awareness.⁴¹ “We may start by being mindful of our breath (*anapana-sati*), but that is only the beginning.”⁴² With this key meditation practice we first learn to become increasingly aware of our body and then extend this to our internal life, to how our mind works, to our feelings, emotions, and thoughts, and externally we apply this within our daily activity, and particularly to our involvement with others. As the process becomes increasingly penetrating so we begin to discern the true nature of how things really are shining through everything. This developing awareness is transformative: we change. Life and meditation merge.⁴³

There is a great deal more to mindfulness than simple awareness or concentrated attention. A fuller understanding of three closely associated terms, *smṛti* (concentration, undistractedness, recollection and memory being some of the more

³⁸ *ibid.*,

³⁹ after Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

⁴⁰ Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*satipatthana*) are: awareness of the Body (*kaya*) and its movements; awareness of feelings (*vedana*), whether painful, pleasant or neutral; awareness of thoughts or mind (*citta*); awareness of mental objects (*dhamma*)

⁴¹ Sangharakshita's Four Dimensions of Awareness are: of things, or environment; of oneself (including, potentially, all the ‘objects’ of the *satipatthana* formulation); of people; of Reality. See Sangharakshita, *Vision and Transformation*, Windhorse, 1999, p. 123ff

⁴² Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

⁴³ after Sangharakshita in an unrecorded study seminar, November 2002

³⁴ Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

³⁵ after Sangharakshita in an unrecorded study seminar, November 2002

³⁶ Sangharakshita, *The Precious Garland*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp. 337–342

³⁷ *ibid.*,

important denotations), *samprajanya* (clear comprehension⁴⁴) and *apramada* (alertness, or literally non-heedlessness), helps to draw out the radical implications. Awareness is active and intelligent; it involves understanding how what we are doing is suited to both our immediate task and our broader spiritual vision and goal. It is also creative, in actively choosing how to engage to a spiritually productive effect. Crucially, through hard experience we learn an awareness of the conditions that support mindfulness and those that undermine it, as well as developing the ability to actively guard those conditions. Our practice involves being aware of the significance of cultivating awareness, of why we need to be aware and integrated – not just in terms of its overall impact on our lives, but in the particular detail of our everyday life. In this way we remain aware of where, minute by minute, and day by day, mindfulness is taking us. Through reflecting upon our progress in developing this quality, we become increasingly aware of the effects of bringing it to the centre of our life. True mindfulness is at the same time free, spontaneous and joyful.⁴⁵

A major consequence of cultivating awareness is that we integrate the whole of our self: our intellect, emotions and volition, thereby realising our heights and depths. This begins with 'horizontal' integration, described earlier in terms of harmonizing our different 'selves'; and continues with 'vertical' integration, in the course of which engage with the second stage of *A System of Meditation*. In the course of vertical integration, we transform our deeper emotions and drives, and develop increasingly significant meditative experience, particularly via absorption in *dhyana*. All this helps us to directly experience the impact of the Dharma in our lives.⁴⁶

But how do we become more aware? Often, the painful consequences of our previous lack of awareness make us aware of having been

⁴⁴ after Subhuti, 1) of functional clarity, 2) of purpose i.e. means and ends consonant, 3) suitability of continuity of practice and endeavour, 4) reality

⁴⁵ after Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

⁴⁶ after Sangharakshita, *What is the Sangha? – the nature of spiritual community*, Windhorse, 2000, p. 107ff; see also, Sangharakshita, *Human Enlightenment*, What Meditation Really Is, Windhorse, 1980, p. 42

unaware; awareness is forced upon us, as it were, by *dukkha*. We then are painfully aware of the need to be more mindful in the future. Our job is to make the most of each moment of mindfulness, not waste it in fruitless regrets about the period of unmindfulness it has succeeded, or in grandiose fantasies about the transformed practice it is heralding.⁴⁷ Of course we learn this as one of the essential skills of how to meditate.

The difficulty with painful feeling is that we prefer not to experience it. Consequently there is a tendency to develop a type of awareness with not much feeling; this is what Sangharakshita identifies as 'alienated awareness'. At the other extreme, we can have feelingful experience but with little awareness. In alienated awareness we looking *at* ourselves, or are aware of ourselves, so to speak, from a distance, without actually *feeling* ourselves, especially our emotions. In cultivating integrated awareness what we aim to do is to bring a heightened feeling and a heightened awareness brought together: 'feeling with awareness, awareness with feeling'; feeling and awareness coalesce. It is not so much an awareness *of* feeling but an awareness *with* feeling, even an awareness *in the midst* of feeling.⁴⁸ A particularly effective antidote to any tendency toward alienated awareness is to focus on developing positive emotion, which we come to in the next section.

Difficulties with developing integrated awareness are frequently experienced as mental hindrances – which we often encounter in the early stages of trying to meditate. But applying the prescribed 'antidotes' to the hindrances as a sort of first aid measure during the meditation session itself is only useful to a point. Hindrances are, of course, not just found in meditation. If we are aiming truly to transform our states of awareness, the relatively small amount of time we spend in meditation cannot outweigh the consequences of a life spent without a consistent level of mindfulness. We experience the hindrances in meditation because this is our usual state throughout daily life. It is our whole way of life and everyday mental habits that are going to

⁴⁷ after Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript of a seminar on *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

⁴⁸ after: Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation; Guide to the Buddhist Path*, Windhorse 1996, p. 155 ff; *Precepts of the Gurus - Third Seminar*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, 346.txt

determine our experience in meditation, for better or worse. A consistent practice of mindfulness before and after meditation will do far more to overcome the hindrances than anything we decide to do in the midst of it. If we cannot build positive and integrated states of mind outside our practice of meditation, then by the time we get round to invoking the antidotes in the course of our meditation, it is really too late. The antidotes may succeed in patching up our meditation temporarily, so that we can just about hobble our way to the end of a particular session, but we need more than that. We need a radical approach. The more we can unify the mind in the ordinary circumstances of daily life the more likely we will be to experience concentration in meditation. Achieving concentration depends on establishing a way of living that is more harmonious, contented, energetic, confidence-inspiring, other-regarding; less restless, grasping, lazy, rancorous and cynical.⁴⁹

In order to bring this about, we have to make clear decisions about the things that will be likely to affect us. The hindrances, as conditioned phenomena, never arise in isolation. We have to make it a practice to watch out for the hindrances in daily life and to set up the kinds of conditions in which they are unlikely to occur, or likely to occur only in a weakened form. Once we get to know our habits of mind, we can avoid situations which tend to stimulate recurrent patterns of unskilful behaviour.

When it comes to the hindrances, it is essential to keep the initiative. This is largely a question of taking personal responsibility for the situations we find ourselves in.

Unfortunately, we can sometimes try to shrug off responsibility by disguising as a practical necessity what is really our personal choice. We can present our decisions as dictated by circumstances, or by other people, as though the whole matter were out of our hands. In reality there are very few occasions when we can say, truthfully, 'I had really no choice.' At every moment of awareness we have the choice of taking ourselves out of a distraction, of changing what we are doing. Invariably, it is not so much the world or 'life' that has drawn us away from the path, as our own inner motivation.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ after Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

⁵⁰ *ibid.*,

Awareness is the quintessential spiritual quality characterising both path and goal. But mindfulness as a sole practice by which to gain Enlightenment is seen within the Mahayana as an unusual methodology. Unless we are exceptionally healthy, we are likely to practice in an unbalanced manner, at least to some extent.

Sangharakshita suggests this is perhaps all the more the case under modern Western circumstances: "The Buddha's early followers would not have known the radical alienation in consciousness that characterises modern life, with its endless concrete, its mass travel, its assaults on the senses, its all-pervasive and meaningless media messages. ... One would imagine that a relatively integrated and balanced person, practising, say, the mindfulness of breathing would feel at the same time a happiness and goodwill towards others, quite naturally and spontaneously. For such a person, the method of the *satipatthana sutta* as it has come down to us in the Pali canon would be quite sufficient in itself. But it is unlikely to be so for us in the modern age. Nowadays, we cannot take the teaching of mindfulness as a completely self-sufficient method without engaging the other-regarding aspect of our nature, with which so much of our deeper energies is tied up – through practices such as the *metta bhavana*, and devotional practices."⁵¹

⁵¹ *ibid.*,

stage 2. positive emotion

On the basis of an emerging integrated awareness, we enter into the second stage of *A System of Meditation*, and cultivate positive emotion through practices such as the *metta bhavana*. These involve a more deliberately dynamic engagement with the inner life of our mind, and particularly with our feelings and emotions. As we progress into this stage, the natural implications of developing awareness and integration unfold: if the first stage of *A System of Meditation* can be said to be characterised by an emphasis on 'horizontal' integration, the second stage continues the process of 'vertical' integration.⁵² On the basis of a certain amount of horizontal integration, we can actively engage in integrating deeper psychic energies, drawing on hitherto unengaged emotions. Furthermore, this developing awareness naturally gives rise to greater ethical sensitivity. By focusing this awareness on what is happening in our heart and mind (*dharmavicaya*) we are able to practise the Four Right Efforts (*samyak-prahana*): we set out to remove the unskillful states that have arisen, prevent further unskillful states arising, whilst maintaining and bringing further skillful states into being.⁵³

Metta, (loving kindness or friendliness), is of course the fundamental positive emotion. However, this stage also involves the development of all the positive emotions, including the other three *brahma viharas* of *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (sympathetic joy), and *upeksa* (calm, tranquillity and equanimity) as well as *sraddha* (faith) and others enumerated in lists such as the eleven positive mental events. This is not as daunting as it may first appear since "by their very nature positive emotions tend to cohere, to integrate more and more with each other being simply different aspects of the creative mind. A positive action or mental state will partake in some sense in all the positive mental events."⁵⁴

An essential prerequisite to developing positive emotion is our ability to distinguish feeling (*vedana*) from emotion.⁵⁵ "The point to

⁵² see Sangharakshita, *Human Enlightenment, What Meditation Really Is*, Windhorse, 1980, p. 42

⁵³ after Sangharakshita, *Know Your Mind*, Windhorse, 1998, p. 26, and p. 238

⁵⁴ Sangharakshita, *Know Your Mind – the psychological dimension of ethics in buddhism*, Windhorse 1998, p. 118

^{54b} there is no one Buddhist term which translates

be emphasised with regard to emotions is that they are not produced automatically. We actively manufacture them out of the raw material of our feelings; they are actions of the mind. For example, if we have a painful experience, we can choose whether or not to manufacture hatred out of it."⁵⁶ So it is not enough just to 'get in touch' with our feelings – although clarity as to what they are is important: we must also learn to how to choose to act with skilful, positive emotion.

Our natural tendency is to want to get away from feelings which are painful, and to have more of feelings which are pleasant: through those volitions we can easily find ourselves indulging some form of hatred or craving. We avoid this by coming back to the feeling itself; developing our awareness of the bare feeling is a crucial part of our practice. But we are not just noting the quality of our feeling, we are also acknowledging the ethical status and karmic significance of what has brought it into being, deciding whether or not we want to pursue it any further, and then acting on that decision.⁵⁷

If we can start to distinguish more clearly between the feelings we receive as impressions and that which we create ourselves in response to those impressions – the volitional element of our emotions – we can begin to take more responsibility for our states of mind. We become less able to suppress feelings that we need to be aware of in order to respond creatively to them. Just as we can indulge in negative emotion as a way of evading uncomfortable feelings, we can try to summon up positive emotion for the same reason. However, we will experience true positive emotion only by looking unblinkingly at our real feelings, and our real emotions.⁵⁸

It is emotion that moves us to act, and action involves energy. Sangharakshita often refers to energy in discussing this stage. As well as developing a deeper awareness of our

exactly to the English word 'emotion'; *cetana*, *karma* and *samskara* are the closest terms, but all have slightly different connotations to the English term. For fuller discussion on *vedana* see Sangharakshita, *Know Your Mind – the psychological dimension of ethics in buddhism*, Windhorse 1998, p. 72 – 83

⁵⁶ Sangharakshita, *Know Your Mind – the psychological dimension of ethics in buddhism*, Windhorse 1998, p. 73

⁵⁷ after Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

⁵⁸ *ibid.*,

energies, we also need to gradually gather them together: directing them and challenging them; intensifying, deepening and gradually refining them, until eventually we transform them into one strong current of not simply positive emotion, but spiritual emotion. Integral to this process is resolving the tension and conflicts between our different energies or interests. As we get our priorities clearer, it's increasingly obvious that unskilful actions are just that: unhelpful and bungling. The deeper perspective in our practice of ethics (*shila*) is to avoid blocking, misusing, manipulating, exploiting, appropriating or poisoning our own energy as well as that of others, and to act with skilfulness, releasing ever more creative energies for the benefit of all. On the basis of this we can enter realms of spiritual beauty such as the meditative absorptions, or *dhyanas*. However, this gathering together of energies is not to be practised only in sitting meditation, important as this is. More fundamentally, we aim to become emotionally positive whatever we are doing, whether sitting, walking, working, talking, or just being quietly by our self.⁵⁹

Often our difficulty is not so much in having energy; it's more in finding sufficient energy of an appropriate quality. Our energy arises spontaneously in connection with definite objects of pleasure and interest, and the nature of these will influence the quality of our energy – as we all know, we can't jump from being preoccupied with worldly pleasures straight into the first *dhyana*. Pleasurable feeling is not in itself unskilful, but it becomes the occasion for unskillfulness to the extent we lose our awareness to it. Contrary to a common misunderstanding, we shouldn't expect to give up all pleasures to get onto the spiritual path. Indeed spiritual life is very much a question of pleasure. The point is that we refine our energy as we put it into more refined objects; if our energy is crude, we can only put it into crude things. The key is to train our aesthetic response, to coax our emotions to develop an increasing refinement until we are able to enjoy meditation with the kind of intensity that at present we perhaps associate only with sex and food. At the outset it is a matter of encouraging emotionally rich sensuous enjoyment over mere sensual indulgence.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

⁶⁰ after Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

Skilful enjoyment which is based in positive emotion is essential to sustaining a sense of vitality, enthusiasm and interest in the spiritual life. It becomes an increasingly striking component in our practice, arising not as a result of the pursuit of pleasure but rather as the fruit of positive effort to transform our awareness. If we allow ourselves to become addicted to ephemeral, worldly pleasures, we are surrendering both our own capacity to exercise choice and our ability to actively cultivate greater awareness of our feelings, energy and emotion in the pursuit of more refined pleasure. Whilst satisfying our appetite for sensual pleasure can involve enjoying intensely pleasurable feeling, it does not necessarily involve any deep emotion. Emotion, in contrast to mere enjoyment, is active. It denotes outward movement, expressive of energy. Pleasure is a fruit of positive emotion; positive emotion itself is that active energy in conscious pursuit of 'the good'.⁶¹

Often discussion – as in the above sections on integration and positive emotion – elucidating the nature of the Buddhist path is necessarily in terms of personal development. However, the danger with this is that we get overly self-concerned, which runs counter to the overall aim of Buddhist practice: to transcend the illusion of self-other, or subject-object, duality. However we try to approach ultimate reality it is always *us* doing it, and as long as we are trying to attain it just for our self, we will fail.⁶² Shantideva speaks of this non-dual perspective in terms of getting rid of suffering itself, wherever it exists in the universe, saying whether it is you that happens to be suffering, or whether it is somebody else, doesn't matter very much to that overall intention.⁶³ So in developing our self we need to cultivate an other-regarding attitude: we cannot become more *truly* self-aware without becoming more aware of others and cultivating a positive emotional attitude of selflessness.⁶⁴

We may start practising the *metta bhavana* and developing positive emotion with a view

⁶¹ *ibid.*,

⁶² *ibid.*,

⁶³ Shantideva, *Bodhicaryavatara*, Ch. 8 Perfection of Meditative Absorption, v. 102ff, trans.. Kate Crosby, Andrew Skilton, OUP, 1996, p.97

⁶⁴ after Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

to getting into higher states of consciousness, becoming a better person, even gaining Enlightenment. In doing so, we take other people as objects for the development of our *metta*: we wish other people well so that we will become a better, happier person. But the practice only works if we really do become concerned about the welfare of others; and when that happens our original reason for doing the practice changes significantly. Our own personal development can no longer be a separate issue from the spiritual welfare of other people. So it could be said that the best way to approach reality is via the other, because we naturally approach it from the point of view of self anyway. By helping others we begin to register that others are just as real and just as important as we are, and we engage in something which we can be certain will be helping to break down the subject-object dichotomy. To put it very simply, it is not enough to feel unselfish – we have to *be* unselfish, which means acting unselfishly. This is the only way to break down the barrier between subject and object. Self and other have to become interchangeable as the source of motive for our actions. We realise as a matter of *fact* that there is no difference between self and other.⁶⁵

The most significant feature of Insight is the individual's growing freedom from an exclusive or enclosed field of concern centring on the self, from our innate egotism and even selfishness.⁶⁶ We make the experience of *metta* the starting point for the development of Insight when we develop intense *metta* towards all equally, as in the fifth stage of the *metta bhavana*, or when we cultivate *upeksa bhavana*. We seek to act as though there were no difference between our self and others: when others are just as near and dear to us as our self we are no longer under the grosser illusions of selfhood – although subtler fetters still remain. In this way the practice of cultivating positive emotion can be a *vipashyana* practice, and the experience arising therefrom develop into Insight.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ after Sangharakshita, *Know Your Mind – the psychological dimension of ethics in buddhism*, Windhorse, 1998, p. 253

⁶⁶ after Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

⁶⁷ after Sangharakshita, Unedited Seminars On: *Door of Liberation*, 683.txt; *1982 Women's Mahaparanibbana Sutta*, p. ; *Hedonism and the Spiritual Life*, 092.txt; *Mitrata Omnibus 1981 preordination*, p. , dharmatranscripts

“If you want to develop Perfect Wisdom, ...[an excellent practice], perhaps surprisingly, is the *metta bhavana*. ... The Enlightenment of the Buddha was not a cold, detached knowledge. He saw with warmth; he saw with feeling; what is more, he saw everything as being pure, or *subha*, which also means beautiful. ... When out of *metta*, you see things as beautiful, you naturally experience joy and delight. And out of that joy and delight flow spontaneity, freedom, creativity, and energy. This flow from *metta* to joy to freedom and energy is the constant experience of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva's wisdom in the fullest sense therefore includes *metta*. In a sense, we could even say that *metta is prajna*.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Sangharakshita, *Wisdom beyond Words – the buddhist vision of ultimate reality*, Windhorse, 2000, p. 186

stage 3. spiritual death

The discussion of the previous two stages – of cultivating integration and positive emotion – might seem to suggest that that is all we need do. Certainly, through practising the first two stages we achieve a great deal. But we can go further: each successive stage of *A System of Meditation* maps out the implications.

“Supposing we are even a true individual – at least psychologically speaking – supposing we have got as far as that, then what comes next? What is the next step after that? ... The next step is death! The happy, healthy individual which you are now must die! ... The mundane individuality, pure and perfect though it may be, must be broken up, ... transcended. ... Only when the conditioned individuality dies [can] the unconditioned individuality – as we can call it – begin to emerge. ... And here the key practice is the Recollection of the Six Elements.”⁶⁹

Sangharakshita recommends the six element practice because, in his experience, it suits the majority of practitioners. This is particularly so he says, “because it's concrete; it involves an element of feeling let's say, not visualisation in the ordinary sense but something of that nature, and so it has a stronger effect and breaks down one's 'I'-sense more effectively than the other practices.”⁷⁰ But those who find other practices such as the recollection of death (as in the root verses of the Bardo), or of impermanence, or the contemplation of the 24 *nidana* chain, or of *sunyata* more inspiring and useful should use them.

In using the terminology of death, Sangharakshita clearly means to draw our attention to the radically existential nature of practice at this stage in *A System of Meditation*. It is redolent of the inevitable choice we all make between ignoble or noble paths: either the mortal and conditioned in pursuit of the mortal and conditioned, or the mortal and conditioned in pursuit of immortal and unconditioned – the Deathless. Such a perspective gives a particular gravity to making decisions about our life; indeed, the choice confronts us in every situation at every moment in our life: to either react or respond creatively.⁷¹ The creative mind is essential to

the process of meditating effectively at whatever stage we're practising; we have in effect been making this choice right from the outset.

At this stage of meditation, the particularly pertinent characteristic of that creativity is a radical willingness to change, to give up, relinquish, let go, renounce, go forth from identifying with our old self; to break free of our attachment to our individualised mundane consciousness, however happy, refined and mature. We need to go beyond identifying with our illusion of a self-sufficient and self-sustaining, irreducible self.⁷² We aim to relinquish all that our conditioned self associates with and finds itself upon. To do so we use insight (*vipashyana*) practice – which is covered more fully in Section 3 under *the stage of vision* and Section 4 under *vipashyana practices* – and thereby enjoy even more positive experience than the previous two stages of meditation, which nevertheless are an essential foundation.

Within the six element practice we practise letting go of the elements Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Space, and even our limited consciousness, i.e. all the constituents of our psycho-physical experience. As we review each one, we reflect on our conditioned, impermanent and insubstantial nature, which is not a reliable source of self-identity. We learn how our usual sense of our self is limited and limiting.⁷³ In this way the six element practice is a *sunyata* meditation because it helps us to realise the 'emptiness' of our own mundane individuality. When we no longer rely for our identity and security on our conditioned self's habitual constructs, on our perception of the material world, and on our usual mental processes, then our individual consciousness is free to withdraw from them, 'to die' into, so to speak, universal consciousness, and in a sense realise its everlasting identity with it.⁷⁴

It is not as though our individuality simply merges into something non-individual, or even supra-individual, so that we become rather featureless. We become more 'ourselves' than

Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp.

⁶⁹ after Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, Windhorse, 2001, p. 121 ff

⁷⁰ after Subhuti, *Sangharakshita – A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*, Windhorse, 1994, p. 204

⁷¹ after Sangharakshita, *The Bodhisattva Vow*, Lecture No. 67; *The Bodhisattva Ideal – Wisdom & Compassion in Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1999, p.83

⁶⁹ Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

⁷⁰ Sangharakshita, *Q&A 1978 Order Convention*

⁷¹ after Sangharakshita, *Aryapariyesana Sutta*,

ever before. There is a indescribable fusion of individuality and universality; we are more universal, but at the same time more individual. Paradoxically, it is the individual that expresses universal experience. If there wasn't limited form, what medium could there be for the expression of the universal experience? The use of the term 'universal' can be misleading, if it makes us think of something abstract and common. When the individual attains the universal, it is not as though the individual is merged into something which is non-individual. From a spiritual point of view, universality is a particular way in which the individual behaves. For instance, when the individual is developing *metta*, it is an individual being universal. Universality is an attitude that pertains essentially and distinctively to the individual.⁷⁵

According to the Bardo Thodol, for those who have prepared sufficiently, the assured opportunity for experiencing universal consciousness is at the time of death. Then we may experience the full impact of our *sunyata* nature as a brilliant clear light, when the 'son-light' returns to and merges into the 'mother-light'; but if we are unable to sustain this, consciousness is re-individualised.⁷⁶

In the final part of the six element practice we aim to learn how to make the transition to universal consciousness, i.e. to experience our intrinsic 'essential', void or empty (*sunya*) nature, by letting go of, or transcending our discriminative, analytical, dualistic consciousness (*vijnana*) that, in associating with the other four *skandhas*,⁷⁷ creates our experience of our mundane self and world. We see that it is in the coming together of internal and external sense-bases that our dualistic awareness arises; we see that the experience of subject and of object arise in dependence upon each other and that there is no fixed continuity of person. *Sunyata* as a metaphor for the death of the conditioned self doesn't mean complete nothingness or annihilation; *sunyata* is a transcendent non-discriminative awareness (*jnana*), which is symbolised both by the blue sky of visualised

⁷⁵ after Sangharakshita, *Mitrata* 84, p.42; or, Q&As on *The White Lotus Sutra*, Men's Study Leaders, Padmaloka, 1986, dharmatranscripts,

⁷⁶ after Sangharakshita, *Q&A 1978 Order Convention*; also, *The Bodhisattva Ideal – Wisdom & Compassion in Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1999, p.83

⁷⁷ *rupa, vedana, samjna, samskara*

sadhanas and by the figures in the Five Buddha Mandala.⁷⁸ Again, it is important to remember what a deeply satisfying, enjoyable, even blissful experience this is.

Obviously to learn to do this takes time and practice. What we're trying to do in the six element practice is break free of the poison of conceit, particularly in the form our self-view (*sakayadrsti*), the first of the three fetters⁷⁹ (*samyojana*).⁸⁰ Our 'ego', complete with likes and dislikes, views and so on, is a self-perpetuating illusion, arising only in dependence upon our previous actions, our ingrained habits of consciousness. Even though in reality there is no separation between subject and object, we are unable to plunge into reality, simply due to the mind-made fetters which hold us back.⁸¹ The reason why this is so hard is that we hold very strongly to the conviction that change in our deepest being is unthinkable. We take ourselves as we are now as a given, as something absolute, and we want it that way: we are what we are, and can't, and even, won't change. We're unable to conceive of our self any other way; we're wilfully resistant to the possibility of changing, developing, transforming our self except in a relatively superficial sense.⁸²

The fact is we're frightened: we intuitively understand the precariousness of our individuality and life. Awareness of our fragile existence is inseparably connected with awareness of our death – of not existing. Such is the basic root of all fear.⁸³ For our ego, spiritual death portends complete disintegration, dissipation, erasure, obliteration, blotting out. But this fear dissolves when we willingly transcend our habitual 'egotism', our holding on and attachment to our old self, our self-preoccupation, our selfishness. "The essential thing is to have the experience of an infinite

⁷⁸ after Sangharakshita, *Q&A 1978 Order Convention*

⁷⁹ *sakayadrsti, vicikitsa* (doubt), *silavrata-paramarsa* (attachment to rites and rituals as ends in themselves)

⁸⁰ after Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp.

⁸¹ Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript of a seminar on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see Note 6)

⁸² after Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp.

⁸³ after Sangharakshita, *The Door of Liberation*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp. [683.txt]

expansion [my italics] of consciousness. One shouldn't take this image of the smaller consciousness merging into the greater too literally; the metaphor of a dewdrop slipping into the sea, shining or otherwise, is just a metaphor. ... The physical universe isn't excluded from this infinite consciousness, but it doesn't constitute a barrier to it. It's as though one's consciousness goes through it. It is not that something literally isn't there that was there before, but it is no longer seen as an obstacle; it becomes transparent, as it were."⁸⁴

We actually embrace death when we go beyond our mundane individuality; in dying we are transformed. There is no really radical spiritual change, no total transformation, without being willing to die in terms of what we were before. "We have to be ready to give up our old life, to forget old problems and old solutions. We have to be ready to make a completely fresh start." If we want to be completely transformed, we must die.⁸⁵

In transforming ourselves we not only break free from old habitual patterns, we free ourselves to act in wholly new ways. The taste of freedom is the theme of one of Sangharakshita's classic lectures describing the process. Hand in hand with spiritual death comes spiritual rebirth – the former only makes sense in the light of the latter, and the latter can only arise to the extent the former is complete and wholehearted. This is classically symbolised in the archetypal imagery describing the Buddha's Enlightenment, and his victory over Mara, over death.

stage 4. spiritual rebirth

The notion of spiritual rebirth is of a change in the individual so radical that they become a new person, a new human being. "When the mundane self has died, what happens next is that, ... out of that experience of the death of the conditioned mundane self, in not very traditional language, the *Transcendental Self* arises ... the *new you* – you as you will be if only you allow yourself to die."⁸⁶

This type of language might appear to be at odds with the doctrine of *anatman*, or no-Self. But this is not actually the case. "The [self] *atman* that is being denied ... is our present being *conceived as something ultimate*, beyond which there is no wider or higher possibility, or which we are never going to transcend. ... What the doctrine is getting at is that beyond our present mode of existence and experience there are other dimensions of being which we can grow towards in a way that is inconceivable to our present sense of individuality."⁸⁷ So, "we do not ... have to drop the concept of 'self', so long as we are clear that it is an operational concept."⁸⁸ "The fact is that we *do* have a self as the sum total of our activities, our thinking, our seeing, our feeling, our willing, and our imagining. ... The *anatman* doctrine simply warns us not to abstract an entity apart from and somehow activating these processes. There *is* something else behind them – ... another dimension of consciousness, ... even Enlightenment – [but it is only to be thought of as a transcendent 'self', in the sense of being beyond time and space.]"⁸⁹

"A good model for our practice is one that involves the refining of the empirical self – making it ever more positive – until it evaporates ... in some higher dimension. Associated with the real empirical self is a healthy desire and even a healthy anger or energy which is neither good nor bad, but just happens to be the raw – even crude – materials that we need to work on and transform into something beautiful. The empirical self is as necessary to the Buddhist as clay is to the potter. ... We can even speak of 'something' that grows, and sort out the metaphysics of that 'something' afterwards. At

⁸⁴ Sangharakshita, *The Bodhisattva Ideal – Wisdom & Compassion in Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1999, p.83

⁸⁵ after Sangharakshita, *Jewel Ornament of Liberation, Ch. 1 The Motive*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp. [248.txt]; after Sangharakshita, *Transforming Self & World – themes from the Sutra of Golden Light*, Windhorse 1995, p. 46ff

⁸⁶ Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

⁸⁷ Sangharakshita, *Wisdom Beyond Words – Sense and Non-sense in the Buddhist Prajnaparamita tradition*, Windhorse, 1993, p.129

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p.220

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p.130

the appropriate time we will appreciate that this development of consciousness involves transcending our present individuality, and becoming part of something much larger.⁹⁰

So the reason for this use of language of spiritual rebirth and a Transcendental Self is to guard against any abstract or impersonal interpretation of what it means to be enlightened. In aspiring to becoming Enlightened, to eventually becoming like one or another enlightened human figure whether historical or archetypal, our ideal necessarily finds expression in human form. "The inadequacy of all positive descriptions being fully admitted, it is not a question of *defining* the Goal as *being*, in the ultimate sense, personal, but of describing it *as though* it was such for practical purposes. After all, personality, even of the 'normal' human type, is the highest category available to ordinary consciousness and premature renunciation of the use of it might involve the risk of the Goal being conceived not as transcendent to personality so much as infra-personal."⁹¹

The Buddhist model of the path is dualistic in that it necessarily has to propose a goal to make it meaningful. Being dualistic, this model is appropriate for most practical spiritual purposes in consideration of the path, but it is certainly problematic when the path involves addressing the goal, because as the 'end' of the 'path' the goal necessarily suggests something fixed, final and static. The Buddha's reluctance to provide a substantial description of the Enlightened state (the word 'state' is itself unhelpfully cognate with 'static') simply reflects his awareness of the inadequacy of dualistic language with reference to non-dual reality. Indeed, the notion of some final state in which we remain, perfected and immutable, seems strangely inadequate to the vital fervour and commitment with which we need to pursue it. The Buddhist path is essentially a creative process, transforming something positive into something more positive, and creating from that something still more positive again.⁹² "Instead of drifting on the winds and tides of the world, one fixes upon a clear goal, and even against a head wind, one tacks back and forth, sometimes quite obliquely, but

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p.130

⁹¹ Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels*, Windhorse, 1998, p.120, quoted in Subhuti, *A New Voice*, p. 205

⁹² after Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript of a seminar on *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

maintaining a steady course. The important thing is to get the 'feel' of this gradual progression, of everything coming together, of energy welling up and of a continuous forward movement that runs right up to the attainment of Insight, and even beyond it."⁹³ The creative mind, being the principle of the spiritual path, continually finds fresh expression in a gradual yet progressive sequence. We constantly reinvent ourselves in the image of our highest ideals; Path and Goal merge.

However we conceive of our ideal, this stage of meditation, of spiritual rebirth, marks our coming into communication with it, Going for Refuge to it, having increasingly direct contact with it. We become personally involved at every level of our being, finding ever greater significance, meaning and fulfilment in experiencing our vision of our higher transcendental self. This new being in effect arises out of the one single transcendental reality of which all the different Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are an expression – each expresses this from a different perspective to our unenlightened minds. In our Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels we form a decisive connection with one or another transcendental form into which we are striving to evolve. This is the pinnacle of *A System of Meditation*, its apotheosis: meditation envisaged in its fullest and most creative form.

The meditation practice(s) that Order members take up at ordination – their *sadhana* – is the focus for this creativity and the means for bridging the gap between aspiration and eventual realisation. Sangharakshita has made it clear that our *sadhana* need not necessarily involve visualisation practice and mantra recitation, although this has been the norm for many years.⁹⁴ Within *A System of Meditation* Sangharakshita recommends visualisation and mantra recitation as the best way to develop the stage of spiritual rebirth. As should be clear by now, he acknowledges other forms of practice may serve this purpose, though this is not something he has dwelt on in his own teaching. He has also made it clear that commitment to a specific form of practice is distinct though clearly related to the choice of figure that embodies the vision of the Goal. Commitment to that figure at ordination does not necessarily entail

⁹³ *ibid.*,

⁹⁴ after Sangharakshita, *Q&As with Theris 2002*, dharmatranscripts, p. 11ff

an undertaking to ‘visualise’ that figure as part of the *sadhana*, although for many it does. This is explained in Subhuti’s Shabda article. (See appendix no. 4).⁹⁵ This means, for example, that *anapana-sati* or the six element practice can be chosen as a *sadhana*.

Whatever the *sadhana*, it is used as the means to realising spiritual rebirth, and inasmuch as all the prior stages of *A System of Meditation* are integral to it, a means also to integration, positive emotion and spiritual death. This is not to say that at times we might not choose to take up other practices to develop specific qualities that we feel in need of developing, such as using *metta bhavana*, or *bodhicitta* practice to help address the need to develop positive emotion. What it does mean is that we will actively seek ways to embody all four stages, or emphases, of *A System of Meditation* in our *sadhana*, and that depending on what seems appropriate we may choose to focus on now one emphasis, now another.

Essential to the stages of spiritual death and rebirth is the attempt to develop Insight (*vipashyana*). This has already been touched on when discussing *Spiritual Death*. It also is discussed more fully in Section 3 under *the stage of vision*, and again in Section 4 under the heading of *Vipashyana practices*. Whatever practice(s) we use to cultivate these stages of spiritual death and rebirth, we will have to consciously address the issue of how to develop Insight. Sangharakshita in *A System of Meditation* recommends Visualisation and mantra recitation as being particularly efficacious in this - which is why so many Order members use this as their *sadhana* practice. The discussion below draws out the implications of following this approach.

Being able to use visualisation as a effective means of *vipashyana* is based in our response of *sraddha* to the visualised figure of our choice. It’s helpful to appreciate that the middle way between either reductionism or literalism in relating to the visualised figure is the emergence of a latent spiritual faculty called by Sangharakshita the Imaginal or higher visionary faculty. This Imaginal faculty, in being an inseparable fusion and harmony of our reason and emotion, gives access to

poetic truth, or truth of the imagination, and eventually to the higher supra-historical, supra-rational reality of the Dharma of which the figure is then an expression. In other words the figure becomes an archetypal image or symbol for us – we find our self deeply moved by it; it speaks to us of something much higher, or deeper, and beyond mundane reality. And the meaning of this symbol cannot be exhausted by words – indeed the danger is that we may think that with an explanation of the symbol, we’ve understood it. The figure being imbued with this significance as a symbolic archetypal image, we find a progressive unfolding of meaning and truth as we contemplate it.

“But though I have spoken of the imaginal faculty, the expression should not, in a sense, be taken too literally. The imagination, or image-perceiving faculty, is not so much a faculty among faculties as the man – the spiritual man – himself. It is spoken of as a faculty because, in the case of the vast majority of people, it exists in such a rudimentary form that it appears to be simply a ‘faculty’ like, for instance, reason or emotion, or because it has not yet been developed or manifested at all. 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. That is to say, in perceiving an image what one really perceives is, in a sense, oneself.”⁹⁶

It is with this Imaginal faculty we apprehend Insight – with which we directly experience ‘knowledge and vision of things as they really are’ (*yathabhutajnanadarsana*). “This Enlightenment experience is of the ultimate meaning of things ... of a shining forth of a light, an illumination, in the brightness of which things become visible in their reality; ... not of objects illuminated from without but entirely of innumerable beams of light, all

⁹⁵ Subhuti, *The nature of ‘Sadhana’ and its relationship to Going for Refuge in the Context of Ordination into the Western Buddhist Order*, Shabda, October 2001, p. 71 ff

⁹⁶ Sangharakshita, *The Priceless Jewel*, The Journey to Il Convento, Windhorse, 1996, pp. 47 - 65

intersecting and intersected, none of which offers any resistance to the passage of any other."⁹⁷

One reason why visualisation practice works so well in providing the right conditions for the arising of Insight is that we can find the visualised figure, whether archetypal or historical, very attractive and beautiful.⁹⁸ This response may be to the physical form, or to some quality the figure symbolises, such as Truth, Beauty, Wisdom, Compassion, Fearlessness, Generosity. To have this sort of feeling for the Buddha or Bodhisattva is even more important than being able to visualise correctly in the technical sense of seeing an eidetic image; regardless of whether we can visualise in this way – and many people do have difficulty with this – cultivating the feeling that the figure is present and enjoying their qualities is critical.⁹⁹ Whatever 'sense' faculty we principally employ to 'visualise', with our positive emotions, especially *śraddha*, engaging fully with the visualised figure, enabling deepening concentration, and even absorption in the dhyanic sense, we are at least temporarily more completely integrated, and this provides propitious grounds for insight to arise.

Through visualising, we bypass conceptual discursiveness, and enact symbolically the content, so to speak, of Insight, thereby helping to precipitate a direct and unmediated experience of it. For example, if we visualise our self as Tara, i.e. as diaphanous and radiating light-rays of compassion, we are much more likely to recognise the innate emptiness of our own being.¹⁰⁰

Another example of this way to precipitate a direct insight is when we alternate visualising externally and internally: either visualising externally the figure as the enlightened being, (which of course is not an object, but we cannot but think of it as such), or visualise the enlightened being as subject, as our self. By experiencing the imaginal nature of the object in one kind of practice, and the subject in another, the two are experienced as

complementary. As we alternate these forms of practice, they gradually merge, approximating to the state where we don't experience any duality between subject and object, where we can have a sort of flash of insight, a non-dual experience which pertains exclusively to neither the subject nor the object: the distinction between them is transcended; we neither 'see' in front, nor within.¹⁰¹ Conceptual reflection on the experience afterwards helps strengthen whatever insight we've had.

⁹⁷ Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels - the central ideals of Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1998, p.49

⁹⁸ after Sangharakshita, *Forest Monks in Sri Lanka*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, p. part 6

⁹⁹ after Sangharakshita, *LBC Order Questions & Answers 1990*, dharmatranscripts, 132.txt

¹⁰⁰ after Sangharakshita, *Forest Monks in Sri Lanka*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, p. part 6

¹⁰¹ after Sangharakshita, *Q&A 1978 Order Convention*, dharmatranscripts, p.

just sitting

Just sitting is not a separate stage of *A System of Meditation*. Taken up as Sangharakshita has taught it, it is not even a practice as such – “indeed it is the absence of the need to practise because one is already in a meditative state and can continue it effortlessly ... neither mak[ing] an effort nor not mak[ing] an effort.”¹⁰² In this way just sitting can help to complete our experience of any particular session of meditation practice and therefore each stage of *A System of Meditation*. Here it will suffice to quote fairly fully from the original talk:

“What about just sitting? ... It’s difficult to say anything about it because ... when one just sits, well, one just sits! But at least one can say that there is a time when one just sits. ... In all of these other meditations conscious effort is required. But one must be careful that [all] this conscious effort [exerted in these other meditations] does not become too willed, even too wilful, and in order to counteract this tendency, in order to guard against this possibility, we can practise just sitting, ... (if of course just sitting can be described as a meditation practice). ... In other words, practise just sitting in between the other methods, ... so that there is a period of activity, during which you are practising say, the mindfulness of breathing, ... then a period of passivity, receptivity. So in this way we go on: activity; passivity; activity; passivity. .. In this way we go on: Mindfulness; just sitting; Metta; just sitting; Recollection of the Six Elements; just sitting; Visualisation; just sitting. In this way we can go on all the time, having a perfect rhythm as it were, and achieving in this way a perfectly balanced practice, taking hold of; letting go. Taking hold of; letting go. Grasping; opening up. ... Action; non-action. In this way we achieve a perfectly balanced practice of meditation, a perfectly balanced spiritual life, and in this way the whole system of meditation becomes complete.”¹⁰³

Just sitting is an opportunity to ‘rest’ in our practice, assimilating and enjoying the fruits of our previous effort (*bhavana*). The elements of relaxation, openness, receptivity, and non-action balance out and complete that prior

period of effort. In this way just sitting helps to make the transition from meditative experience back into the external world of activity.

The terminology of just sitting has been the occasion of some confusion, getting conflated both with the ‘Pure Awareness’ practice (discussed in Section 4) and other similar forms of practice from other traditions. To circumvent this, Sangharakshita has recently commented that we need to find an entirely different term for the just sitting as described above – to my knowledge such a term has not been found to date.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Sangharakshita, *Just Sitting*, Shabda, December 1999, p. 118

¹⁰³ Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

¹⁰⁴ Tejananda, *Notes on a Forum between members of the Preceptors’ College and Council and the Vajraloka Teaching Team, Madhyamaloka, June 2000*, Articles Shabda, November 2000, section 1

'ABOVE ME BROODS ...'

Above me broods
A world of mysteries and magnitudes.
I see, I hear,
More than what strikes the eye or meets the ear.

Within me sleep
Potencies deep, unfathomably deep,
Which, when awake,
The bonds of life, death, time and space will break.

Infinity
Above me like the blue sky do I see.
Below, in me,
Lies the reflection of infinity.

Sangharakshita

Section 3. A System of Meditation contextualised

It seems that Sangharakshita's *A System of Meditation* crystallised in his mind over a good number of years. On one occasion he attributed "its growth arising to some extent out [his] very numerous and lengthy discussions with Mr. Chen."¹⁰⁵ Not long before giving the lecture, he gave a closely related teaching on "five principal stages of spiritual life." These bear a very close resemblance to the Five Paths (*margas*) of the Vijnanavada, or *avastha* of the Yogacara, which are explored more fully in the second half of this section. These stages presented as a sequential, progressive series are:

- 1) mindfulness, awareness or integration
- 2) positive emotional energy or meditation
- 3) vision or spiritual death and rebirth
- 4) transformation or meditation on the vision of the previous stage
- 5) compassionate activity or true spontaneity.¹⁰⁶

The close similarity of this teaching with *A System of Meditation* is obvious, and it throws useful light on how Sangharakshita envisaged it both to be understood and applied. Consequently this section explores that relationship. It may seem strange that he has not made any reference to this teaching subsequently. When asked why, he replied that it was "not of any deliberate intent but it didn't come to my mind to do so, [but] if you find ... this particular classification useful, by all means, make use of it and put it into wider circulation."¹⁰⁷

In my view both these teachings merit wider circulation. This is because both these teachings describe the territory of spiritual life in straightforwardly practical and useful terms, whereas, as Sangharakshita observed, "sometimes it seems that the traditional formulations and descriptions don't square very closely with our own actual experience or

our own actual needs." Both teachings exemplify Sangharakshita's application of the 'transcendental critique of religion': that is, if we remember to evaluate whether what we do is actually a means to the 'end' of our genuine spiritual development, freedom and emancipation, we ensure what we do is spiritually alive; that our means is consonant with our ends.¹⁰⁸

In the seminar where Sangharakshita presented the five principal stages of spiritual life, he touched on three different, yet closely related ways of understanding the implications of this teaching. These can be applied equally to *A System of Meditation* and indeed any teaching such as the eightfold path, *paramitas*, or five spiritual faculties:

- i) as a sequence of progressive regular steps or stages to be developed one after the other, which maps out a trajectory of spiritual progress leading all the way to Enlightenment.
- ii) as each stage being in a sense implicit within the others. If we choose to develop one to its fullest, this in effect necessitates developing the others as further dimensions of the one on which we're focusing. For example, if we set out to integrate ourselves to the fullest extent possible, we will necessarily find that process developing through a number of phases, which include positive emotion, vision, transformation, etc. This means that if we are keen on a particular practice, such as the mindfulness of breathing, we do not have to leave it behind to take up the *metta bhavana* in order to move from integration to positive emotion. We simply have to find ways of developing positive emotion within our experience of practising the mindfulness of breathing.
- iii) as a set of complementary and mutually supporting spiritual qualities to be developed simultaneously within our daily spiritual life and practice, the development of one helping in the development of each of the others. As is clear from a previous quote (see under *regular and irregular steps* in section 1), we find ourselves 'spiralling' through these different dimensions of practice, the one

¹⁰⁵ Sangharakshita, *Forest Monks of Sri Lanka*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, part 6 of 6

¹⁰⁶ Sangharakshita, *The Precious Garland by Nagarjuna*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp. 337 – 342

¹⁰⁷ Sangharakshita, *1985 Combined Order Convention*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp.

¹⁰⁸ Sangharakshita, *The Inconceivable Emancipation – themes from the Vimalakirti nirdeśa*, Ch. 4 The Transcendental Critique of Religion, Windhorse, 1995, pp. 65–81

feeding into the other, enabling us to take each yet further still. Thus, even on the mundane path, vision, spiritual death, spiritual rebirth, transformation and compassionate activity are integral to our daily spiritual life. The latter approach is described in the following quote, which describes an appealingly simple prescription for daily spiritual life:

“[although] ... the first [step] would be perfected first, the second would be perfected second – that’s where the path of regular steps comes in – very few people [can] actually function in this way [i.e. in terms of completing the practice of each stage fully prior to moving on to the next]. Most people I think, for sometime at least, will follow or will have to follow the path of irregular steps. ... [So] one can think in terms of working on all five stages simultaneously. ... Every day you have got five things to practise as best you can. That is to say you keep up the effort to be mindful and aware and to be as together as possible, as integrated as possible; you remain in as positive a mental state as you possibly can; you do not lose sight of your ultimate goal at any time – you try to apply this to practice at every level, whatever you’ve realised, discovered or seen on the highest level of your being at any time; and you do your best for other people, you do what you can to help people.

“All these five simultaneously. This is your spiritual life and this is your spiritual practice. ... On the practical side, this all that you really need, or all that you really need to think in terms of. ... If you want to think of any particular Buddhist virtue and understand its sort of place in the total scheme you can do that by just allocating it to one or another of these five stages. ... If you just try to do these five things all the time you can forget all about making progress or where exactly you are along the path. You just intensify your effort in those five directions as it were, all the time. You simply can’t go wrong then.”¹⁰⁹

All five elements unfold in the course in our daily activity, whatever we may be practising by way of meditation, communication, right livelihood, *kalyana mitrata*, dharma study, – or indeed any mundane activity.¹¹⁰ This approach provides a structure to our spiritual

life, both immediate and long-term: a spiritual discipline, clearly defined yet flexible, simple and effective. In this way “all aspects of one’s practice, pursued intensively enough, ... lead to that goal [of Enlightenment]. In a way it doesn’t matter which one you start with; the crucial thing is to give yourself to it wholeheartedly. It’s all too easy to end up just jogging along with one’s spiritual life in a comfortable, easy, undemanding way. To avoid this, one needs all the time to be making a definite effort in some particular area of practice ...”¹¹¹

the five principal stages of spiritual life

The first two principal stages of spiritual life are the same as those in *A System of Meditation*: integration followed by positive emotion. Since these two stages have already been addressed, here we will only consider the last three stages: of vision, transformation and compassionate activity. In doing so it’s worth noting that Sangharakshita’s introduction to them in the seminar was largely in terms of treading a path of regular steps – as stages of the transcendental path. As we have just seen, this is certainly not the only way to understand their import.

It is again tempting to try to correlate the two systems, (see Table 6) equating vision with spiritual death, and transformation with spiritual rebirth – leaving compassionate activity unaccounted for. But as is clear from the next quote, Sangharakshita defined the stage of vision in terms of spiritual death *and* rebirth. Consequently this prevents any attempt at tidy correspondences. We must be content with allowing the two different systems to offer slightly different perspectives on the same unfolding process of realisation.

¹⁰⁹ Sangharakshita, *The Precious Garland by Nagarjuna*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, p. 342

¹¹⁰ after Subhuti, *New Voice*, p. 179 ff

¹¹¹ Sangharakshita, *The Bodhisattva Ideal – Wisdom & Compassion in Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1999, p.48

Table 6:

A System of Meditation & 'Principal Stages of Spiritual Development' correlated

A System of Meditation	Integration	Positive Emotion	Spiritual Death	Spiritual Rebirth
	Mindfulness of Breathing Just Sitting	<i>Brahmaviharas</i> Just Sitting	Recollection of the Six Elements Recollection of Impermanence Recollection of Death Contemplating Conditionality: the 24 <i>nidana</i> chain Reflection on <i>sunyata</i>	Visualisation & mantra recitation Just Sitting
Principal Stages of Spiritual Development	Integration	Positive Emotion	Vision Spiritual Death Spiritual Rebirth	Transformation Compassionate Activity

– the stage of vision

“The third stage one could say is the stage of vision. In this stage one sees the Truth – not, of course, regarding Truth as a thing out there to be seen like an ordinary object. One could say that this is the stage of openness to truth, ...[or alternatively] the stage of openness: openness in the direction of ultimate reality, [of] not holding back on the progress of expansion, ... [of] indefinite openness to the ultimate, or, in terms of sight, a vision of reality, vision of truth. This is also the stage of spiritual death ... because it signifies the death of the old self, the death of the ego howsoever much refined and the birth ... – if you like – of the seed of buddhahood. Not that in the sense that that seed wasn't there already, but the seed has now become as it were visible and from that seed the new being as it were, the Buddha will eventually develop and will eventually spring. So the stage of vision is also the stage of death because when you see the truth as it were, you die; or, even, when you die then you can see the

truth. ... So this is the stage of reality, or stage of death – whatever you like to call it – the stage of spiritual rebirth.”¹¹²

Linking the stages of spiritual death and rebirth emphasises their interdependence: analogous to the cycle of physical birth, death and rebirth, spiritual rebirth inevitably follows spiritual death. The death of the ego, however refined, is followed by the seed of new spiritual life. Freedom from samsara is freedom to embrace nirvana.

This stage of vision, of spiritual death and rebirth, is the stage of Insight: an unrestrained openness to the impact of seeing things as they really are. While the previous two stages integrate and refine our conditioned individuality, Insight breaks down that individuality, or rather, perhaps we should say, it enables us to see [eventually] right

¹¹² Sangharakshita, *The Precious Garland*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp. 337 – 342

through it.¹¹³ Given this, the goal can seem a bit alienating, as if we are supposed to become someone we aren't, or even no-one at all; as if we are replaced with a no-one seeing nothingness. But it is, as Blake points out, much simpler than this. "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite'. When consciousness opens out into a non-dual awareness, unobstructed, without barriers or boundaries we perceive more clearly."¹¹⁴

But we can't *make* Insight happen; we can only work on ourselves to set up the best possible conditions for its irruption, whilst cultivating an attitude of openness. "Receptivity works a little like a lightning conductor. If one is able to harness the power of the lightning flash when it comes, that doesn't happen by mere chance: one has set up the conditions to make it possible. But one won't get electricity flowing through the lightning conductor unless a storm passes overhead and lightning strikes it. ... The point is that we, as we at present are, cannot force anything to happen. All we can do is set up the conditions and wait, or act as though we are just waiting."¹¹⁵

As mentioned earlier, the importance of *shamatha* practice as a precondition to being able to engage in effective *vipashyana* practice is a distinctive and important element in Sangharakshita's view of how to cultivate the transcendental path (*lokuttara marga*). On the basis of integration and positive emotion, we experience concentration and spiritual bliss. This process of deepening and refining pleasure has the effect of deepening our concentration even more. *Samadhi*¹¹⁶ – one pointedness, meditative absorption, psychic wholeness – is what arises naturally when we are perfectly happy: to the extent we are happy, to that extent we are concentrated,¹¹⁷ and to that extent we prepare the ground for Insight. In the words of the Buddha: "He who is concentrated sees things as they really are." (*Samyutta-Nikaya*, xxii.5)

¹¹³ Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

¹¹⁴ after Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript of a seminar on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

¹¹⁵ Sangharakshita, *Bodhisattva Ideal Wisdom and Compassion in Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1999, p. 47

¹¹⁶ see the next section for a fuller description of *Samadhi*

¹¹⁷ Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript of a seminar on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

Another critical precondition to developing *vipashyana* is concentrated, directed, intensified reflection, or "*dharma-vicaya*. This is specifically concerned with reviewing one's own mental events, analysing and understanding them. ... One just follows the rise and fall of mental events ... If one keeps it up for long enough and gets competent enough at it, one's attention remains constant even as its object changes. In principle, this is what is meant by *vipashyana* meditation."¹¹⁸

Furthermore, "when we are able to give proper and full consideration to our own experience *in the light of the Dharma* – its doctrines and practices – our thoughts will begin to coalesce into a growing realisation of what freedom ... might mean. This is 'right view' or insight with a small 'i'. With further practice, as we put more and more energy into the whole process, backing it up with meditation, that understanding will transform itself eventually into a decisive change of direction in the whole current of our being. This is Insight with a capital 'I'. It represents a level of insight called 'Stream Entry', which is sufficiently deep to ensure that we will never fall back from it. Stream Entry represents the first decisive break with the cycle of death and rebirth. We are no longer a victim, trapped and dominated by the deeply-rooted tendencies of the first three fetters ..." ¹¹⁹

– the stage of transformation

How does Sangharakshita envisage the stage of transformation? "The stage of transformation is when the vision that you have seen, or if you like, your experience of reality starts, as it were, descending and transforming every aspect of your being. It is not just in the head, not even in your spiritual being; it pervades all parts of your being, all parts of, as it were, your spiritual body. This is also the stage of meditation in a sense, but not the meditation in the sense of the meditation with the help of which you gain this initial visionary experience but the meditation that you practise after that. [In other words,] the practice of meditation in the sense of dwelling on that visionary experience, that glimpse of reality so as to deepen it and broaden it and to bring it down, as it were, so

¹¹⁸ Sangharakshita, *Know Your Mind – the psychological dimension of ethics in buddhism*, Windhorse, 1998, p. 118

¹¹⁹ Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript of a seminar on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

that it pervades and transforms all the different aspects of one's being."¹²⁰

When he stresses meditation as the principal agent of transformation, Sangharakshita is following the traditional exegesis of the path. From this perspective, "a lot of Buddhist practice can seem, from a western perspective, very self-absorbed, which of course it is, especially this stage of the path. [But], there is really no healthy alternative, if one is to be effective in the outside world. Meditation is a sort of clearing the decks for action, a transforming of unskilful and unregarded mental states into integrated and refined energy, for a purpose beyond self-absorption. This is what makes it specifically Buddhist meditation."¹²¹

Nevertheless, transformation also has the implication of any activity that puts our visionary experience into effect. The paths of vision and transformation go hand-in-hand, each helping to precipitate yet deeper and more fundamental change in the other. Therefore, in clearing the decks for action, it's important to recognise that, "Reality is to be experienced in the midst of ordinary life, because there is nowhere else to experience it. ...it can only be here; ...it can only be now. ...You don't have to get away from the conditioned in order to realise the Unconditioned. In its depth, the conditioned 'is' the Unconditioned. 'Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form,' ... in the midst of all these experiences, good, bad, and indifferent, ... Enlightenment is to be attained."¹²²

– The stage of compassionate activity

"Lastly the stage of compassionate activity means that having completely transformed oneself in accordance with one's original vision of reality – one is then in a position really to help others. One could say that this is also the stage of spontaneity – true spontaneity where you don't think what you're going to do to help others – at least not in the ordinary way – you just spontaneously function, you do what needs to be done. There's a sort of overflow of your fully Enlightened being."¹²³ This again is the traditional regular steps approach, which is assuming a high degree of attainment on the Bodhisattva path. But we cannot use our lack of spiritual attainment as an excuse to not help others before we've entered the pearly gates of Enlightenment. As should be clear from the discussion on Positive Emotion, this can be counter-productive. The Bodhisattva Vow, put at its simplest, is forming a whole-hearted wish to devote ourselves to the fulfilment of beings' needs and such action need not be postponed.

Yet genuinely effective and wise compassionate activity is far from easy to achieve. Firstly, we need to get ourselves into a positive enough state to be able to start thinking about the needs of others quite naturally and easily. It is a matter of beginning to overcome, or at least becoming more aware of, our tendency to see people in terms of what we need from them, rather than in terms of what they need, whether practically, materially, or psychologically. It is very rare indeed for us to put ourselves out for other people in a completely disinterested way. This is never going to be easy because we naturally feel our own needs much more strongly than we do those of other people. But we can practise thinking about other people's needs – how we can meet them, or if we cannot meet them ourselves, how we can help people to meet their own needs – even when we are also concerned with immediate, objective, legitimate needs of our own. There is in fact only one need of our own that has to be fulfilled before one can preoccupy oneself effectively with the needs of others: simply a matter of emotional positivity and security. We need to appreciate our own worth and feel we are appreciated by others,

¹²⁰ Sangharakshita, *The Precious Garland*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp. 337 – 342

¹²¹ Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript of a seminar on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see footnote 5)

¹²² Sangharakshita, *Wisdom Beyond Words - Sense and Non-Sense in Buddhist Prajnaparamita Tradition*, Windhorse, 1993, p.65

¹²³ Sangharakshita, *The Precious Garland*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp. 337 – 342

to love ourselves and feel that we are loved by others. On this basis we can begin to develop the sensitivity and awareness to clearly see the real needs of others – not only their material needs, or even their educational needs, but also their need for an ideal to which they can devote themselves, a spiritual path they can follow. We see very clearly the predicament people are in and know that the only real remedy for their plight is a spiritual remedy, that the highest need of all beings is Enlightenment. This is our motivation. We can identify with this need of beings so clearly and completely that all our energies become devoted to its fulfilment; there is no energy left over to consider 'I am doing this.'¹²⁴

It is traditionally said that the greatest gift is the gift of the Dharma. Yet another difficulty in being effectively compassionate is many people are simply not interested in spiritual life – and we cannot make them be, which would be totally counter-productive. We have to leave people free to make their own mistakes. All that we can do is help people to help themselves. And there is no point in getting frustrated if they don't want to make the effort to do it for themselves. We have to recognise there's a limit to what we can do for other people. We can inspire people, encourage them, exhort them, show concern for them and interest in them. We can provide the right conditions and the best facilities. We have to take responsibility for what we can do to help others, but in the last analysis they are responsible for their own lives, even as we are responsible for our own life. Spiritual development is achieved by the individual – and this development may well include a refusal of patronising help. In fact there is very little that we can do for others, even though that very little is important and should be done. The whole sentimental idea of the Bodhisattva ladling out Enlightenment to the humble masses, imposing compassion on them is completely counterproductive as far as spiritual help and support goes, because it does not respect their individuality.¹²⁵

Furthermore paradoxically, although we can resolve to guide all beings to nirvana, even novice Bodhisattvas come to 'know' that in reality no beings exist. This is clearly a

contradiction at the very heart of the Bodhisattva's experience: Bodhisattvas help people freely and spontaneously without any definite notion of helping, without *any notion of people at all*,¹²⁶ without any notion of teaching something called the Dharma. Bodhisattvas just think of themselves - if they think in these terms at all - as talking to people, and sharing their vision with them. In other words, the more our practice of the Dharma deepens, the more it becomes our ordinary way of living.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ after Sangarakshita, *Wisdom Beyond Words - Sense and Non-Sense in Buddhist Prajnaparamita Tradition*, Windhorse, 1993, p. 79ff

¹²⁵ after *ibid.*, p. 249ff

¹²⁶ after *ibid.*, p. 79ff

¹²⁷ after *ibid.*, p. 168

traditional sources

Some people are curious to know whether Sangharakshita based *A System of Meditation* on any traditional teaching. The brief answer is yes, but with deliberate interpretation along the lines discussed in the opening paragraphs of this section.

When communicating his five stages of spiritual life (with which *A System of Meditation* is closely associated) Sangharakshita clearly had at the back of his mind a correlation with a traditional formulation known as the five paths (*margas*, Tib. *lam Inga*). These are explored in Guenther's *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma*,¹²⁸ a work for which Sangharakshita had a high opinion even in the early fifties. This traces the development of teaching from the Theravada on through a number of different traditional Mahayana formulations, all expressing the same essential insight into the nature of spiritual development and what it means to practise the path.

The essential insight – later elaborated by various schools into various fivefold formulations – is expressed in the fundamental twofold distinction between *darsana*, i.e. vision or seeing, and *bhavana*, i.e. practice, cultivation, development or transformation.¹²⁹ The former is the path that leads to entering the Stream (*srotapatti-marga*), the latter the path that unfolds in accordance with that direct insight and which finally culminates in the state of “purity and pellucidity consequent upon the complete saturation of the entire psychic contents with the light of transcendental realisation,”¹³⁰ that is, Enlightenment. By analogy this is the difference between seeing a mountain from afar, and then making the journey to stand on the peak itself. This distinction between paths of Vision and Transformation is of course integral to Sangharakshita's exegesis of the Eightfold Path: “... the aim of this great Buddhist teaching of the Path of Vision and the Path of Transformation is to enable us to

bring the whole of our life up to the level of its highest moments. This is what it means to evolve spiritually. ... It means to achieve Perfect Vision by one means or another, and then transform our whole being in accordance with that vision.”¹³¹

Later elaboration by other schools, using a number of closely related terms, added three further stages to make five, two prior preparatory stages drawing attention to what is necessary to the path of vision (*darsanamarga*), and a final culminating stage that drew out the implications of the fruits of the path of transformation (*bhavanamarga*). For example, the Yogacara enumerates these five stages as:

- 1) the path of accumulation, or preparation (*sambaravastha*, *sambharamarga*, *tshogs lam*)
- 2) the path of application (*prayogavastha*, *prayogamarga*, *sbyor lam*)
- 3) the path of vision (*prativedavastha*, *darsanamarga*, *mthong lam*)
- 4) the path of transformation (*bhavanavastha*, *bhavanamarga*, *sgom lam*)
- 5) the path of completion, mastery (*nisthavastha*, *nisthamarga*, *mthar lam*)¹³²

In the first stage, on the path of accumulation (*sambharamarga*), we establish a foundation of relative integration by accumulating certain moral, intellectual, and spiritual qualities – this involves three degrees of intensity of practice. First, we find a teacher, and Go for Refuge to the Three Jewels under their guidance, listen to the Dharma (*srutamayaprajna*), and practise the four foundations of mindfulness. Secondly, we more consciously practise the four right efforts and ethics. Thirdly, we develop the psychic powers (*rdhipada*). As a result, even this first stage, the path of accumulation, can precipitate an effective link

¹²⁸ Guenther, Herbert V., *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma*, Motilal Banarsidass, 2nd Ed, 1974; Sangharakshita, 1985 *Combined Order Convention*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp. 337 – 342

¹²⁹ Guenther, *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma*, p.195

¹³⁰ Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels*, Windhorse, 1998, pp. 132–3

¹³¹ Sangharakshita *Vision & Transformation – An Introduction to the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path*, Windhorse, 1999, p.15

¹³² after Sangharakshita, *Know Your Mind – the psychological dimension of ethics in Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1998, pp. 25 – 29; after Guenther, Herbert V., *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma*, Motilal Banarsidass, 2nd Ed 1974, p. 235, and after: Gampopa, translated & annotated by Herbert V. Guenther, *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, Rider, London, 1970. p.232; see Vasubandhu *Trimsika*, v. 25 – 30

with the Transcendental, although probably not irrevocably.

The path of application (*prayogamarga*), primarily envisaged in terms of effective meditative practice, leads to a deeper understanding of the nature of reality with the firm establishing of the five spiritual faculties.

Having mobilised all our energies, and reached the peak of mundane development, we become sufficiently open to enter the path of vision (*darsanamarga*), in which we have some direct vision of the truth. This involves a radical shift in perception where “petty self-centredness with all its likes and dislikes gives way to a new self-concept which is in harmony with reality.”¹³³

In the light of that breakthrough, a gradual transformation of our whole being takes place. This path of transformation (*bhavanamarga*) “is already present and coexistent with the path of vision since we cannot help acting on what we have seen.”¹³⁴ It is the path of practice inasmuch as we act on that which has been seen. Whether by way of the Eightfold path or the six *paramitas*, we attain a wider and more comprehensive realisation of the Truth – our progress on this path of transformation often being correlated with the ten *bhumis*, or levels of attainment of the Bodhisattva.

Finally as the path of transformation reaches its highest perfection, the path of completion, mastery (*nisthamarga*) arises, constituting the continuing development of ever fuller Enlightenment. It is not a full-stop, since Enlightenment abounds in compassionate activities that are completely spontaneous, which is why perhaps Gampopa calls this the stage of Buddha activity.

¹³³ Guenther, *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma*, p. 241

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 243 ff

Table 7: A correlation of all the different formulations

Five Spiritual Faculties	<i>smṛti</i> Mindfulness	<i>śraddhā</i> Faith	<i>prajñā</i> Wisdom	<i>samādhi</i> Meditation	<i>virya</i> Energy
Sangharakshita's A System of Meditation	Integration	Positive Emotion	Spiritual Death	Spiritual Rebirth	
	Mindfulness of Breathing	<p>Just Sitting</p> <p><i>mettabhavana</i></p> <p><i>karunabhavana</i></p> <p><i>muditabhavana</i></p> <p><i>upekkhabhavana</i></p>	<p>Just Sitting</p> <p>Recollection of the Six Elements</p> <p>Recollection of Impermanence</p> <p>Recollection of Death</p> <p>Contemplating Conditionality: the 24 <i>nidāna</i> chain</p> <p>Reflection on <i>śunyata</i></p>	<p>Just Sitting</p> <p>Visualisation & mantra recitation</p>	
Stages of Spiritual Development	Mindfulness – Integration	Positive Emotion	Vision, Spiritual Death, Spiritual Rebirth	Transformation	Compassionate Activity
Five Paths	path of preparation (<i>sambharamārga</i>)	path of application (<i>prayogamārga</i>)	path of vision (<i>darsanamārga</i>)	path of transformation (<i>bhavanamārga</i>)	path of completion (<i>nīśamārga</i>)
Mundane & Transcendental Paths	Mundane (<i>laukika</i>) paths of Vision & Transformation				
Transcendental (<i>lokuttara</i>) paths of Vision & Transformation					

When considering the traditional background to *A System of Meditation*, it's also worth casting an eye over the Theravada view of meditation outlined in *A Survey of Buddhism*.¹³⁵ Sangharakshita's discussion of *samadhi*, as defined in its widest sense makes clear a distinct and comprehensive path of meditation, a series of progressive meditative stages, leading from ordinary mundane consciousness to the very heights of Enlightenment.

Whilst remembering that it is only with reference to the mental product of perception – an inwardly perceived object – that concentration in the sense of *samadhi* develops,¹³⁶ *samadhi* comprises:

A. *Preparatory stages to development of concentration*: mindfulness and self-possession; contentment; emancipation from the hindrances;

B. *The Development of One-pointedness*: preliminary exercises for the development of one-pointedness of mind;¹³⁷ the degrees and kinds of concentration;¹³⁸

C. *The development of meditative absorption and supernormal knowledge*: the various ascending states of superconsciousness (*jhana*) to which concentration is capable of leading; different supernormal powers (*abhinna*) for the development of which these states are the basis,¹³⁹ including the three

¹³⁵ Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, Windhorse, 2001, pp. 179 – 194

¹³⁶ Sangharakshita, *Know Your Mind – the psychological dimension of ethics in buddhism*, Windhorse, 1998, p. 111

¹³⁷ Forty *Kammattanas* 'Place of Work': a) Ten Devices (*kasina*): earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red and white, space & consciousness; b) Ten Impurities (*asubha*): various disgusting aspects of bodily existence, e.g. different stages of decomposition of the corpse; c) Ten Recollections (*anusatti*): Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, Sila, Dana, death, the body, respiration (*anapana-sati*) & peace of nirvana; d) Four *Brahmaviharas* & Four Formless Spheres (*arupayatana*); e) Loathsomeness of Food (*ajare patikkula-sanna*); f) Analysis of Four Elements (*catudhatuvavatthana*)

¹³⁸ 1. *Parikamma nimitta* – preparatory image. 2. *Parikamma samadhi* – preparatory concentration. 3. *Uggaha-nimitta* – acquired mental image. 4. *Upacara-samadhi* – access concentration. 5. *Patibhaga-nimitta* – reflex image. 6. *Appana-samadhi* – full concentration

¹³⁹ *Abhinnas*. i) mind-made body (*manomaya*) ii) divine ear (*dibba-sota*): clairaudience iii) knowledge

gateways (*samadhis*) to liberation.¹⁴⁰

In musing on the connection with the traditional formulation of *samadhi* with *A System of Meditation*, we might wonder how the five principal stages of spiritual life could be correlated with the traditional trainings *sila*, *samadhi* and *prajna*. In replying to this question Sangharakshita gave the following response: "Well very quickly and roughly I think that mindfulness and awareness, or integration corresponds to *sila*, though not perfectly because it is a different classification; positive emotion and energy, or meditation, to *samadhi*; and vision, or spiritual death and rebirth to *prajna*; and then the transformation or meditation and the compassionate activity – these are extensions of *prajna* [or *vimukti*], one could say."¹⁴¹

Elsewhere,¹⁴² Sangharakshita correlated these five stages: Awareness, Positive Emotion, Vision, Transformation and Compassionate Activity, respectively, with the five Spiritual Faculties: Mindfulness, Faith, Wisdom, Meditation, Energy – these five of course being practised so as to balance one another, each complementing its counterpart, thereby leading to a rounded development of spiritual qualities, which in itself is a prerequisite for progressive development.

All in all, we can conclude that *A System of Meditation* is clearly rooted in the traditional formulations of the path.

of the minds of others – telepathy (*parassa cetopariya-nana*) iv) remembrance of former births (*pubbe-nivas anu-sati*) v) divine eye (*dibba-cakkhu*) sees beings vanishing from one sphere of existence, reappearing in another in accordance with karma vi) knowledge of the destruction of the *asavas*.

¹⁴⁰ The three gateways (*vimoksa-mukha*) to the Transcendental Path (*lokuttara marga*) by contemplating: i. *dukkha* → *apranihita-samadhi* (aimless, unbiased); ii. *anitya* → *animitta-samadhi* (signless); iii. *anatman* → *sunyata-samadhi* (emptiness).

¹⁴¹ Sangharakshita, *1985 Combined Order Convention*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, p.

¹⁴² Sangharakshita, *The Precious Garland*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp. 337–342

Section 4. Related issues

mula yogas

How do the foundation or *mula yogas* fit into *A System of Meditation*? The four *mula yogas* are the Going for Refuge and prostration practice, the generation of the Bodhicitta, the offering of the Mandala and the visualisation of Vajrasattva with the recitation of his mantra. Sometimes the *kalyana mitra yoga* is included as a fifth. How any particular one of these practices fits into *A System of Meditation* depends on how we engage with the practice: whether we do it 'merely' as a concentration exercise; practice with great faith and devotion; or whether we use it to cultivate an experience of *sunyata*, of insight and spiritual rebirth. Consequently it's impossible to say that any one *mula yoga* is efficacious with any particular stage of *A System of Meditation*; it depends both on the degree to which, and in what spirit we practice it.

When we do the Bodhicitta practice, it's helpful to remember Sangharakshita's distinction between provisional, real and absolute levels of Going for Refuge, as well as that between paths of vision and transformation. Traditionally this is expressed by Shantideva in this way:

"The Awakening Mind should be understood to be of two kinds, in brief: the Mind resolved on Awakening [*Bodhipranidhicitta*] and the Mind proceeding towards Awakening [*Bodhiprasthanacitta*]. The distinction between these two should be understood by the wise in the same way as the distinction is recognized between a person who desires to go and one who is going, in that order."¹⁴³

Bodhipranidhicitta is "desiring single-mindedly, and from the depths of one's being to attain Supreme Enlightenment for the benefit of all."¹⁴⁴ This is the experience of the novice or aspiring Bodhisattva before the Bodhicitta has actually arisen – and therefore what the majority of us will be effectively cultivating in our practice of the Bodhicitta *mula yoga*. The irruption of the Bodhicitta (*bodhicitta-utpada*) expresses itself as *Bodhiprasthanacitta* which, in actually fulfilling

¹⁴³ Shantideva, *Bodhicaryavatara*, Ch. 1, v. 15 - 16, trans., Kate Crosby, Andrew Skilton, OUP, 1996, p. 6

¹⁴⁴ Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels*, 1998, p.177

the Bodhisattva vow (*pranidhana*) marks a radical turning point in conviction and effectiveness of commitment. At this point the Bodhicitta is a transcendental experience.¹⁴⁵ It "arises when the mundane self is destroyed or seen through, but before the Transcendental self, as we call it, has it really emerged. ... The Bodhicitta therefore arises [as understood in terms of regular steps] in between the third and fourth stages of *A System of Meditation*, the *bodhicitta* being the seed of spiritual rebirth."¹⁴⁶

vipashyana practices

In the course of discussing Insight practices practised by Order members at a Madhyamaloka – Vajraloka Colloquium, a terminology of "core practices" arose.¹⁴⁷ Whilst this is not of Sangharakshita's coinage, and not one that he thinks particularly helpful, the term is used to denote those Insight practices usually recommended to Order members, and usually *not* taught to non Order members. The Insight practices explicitly recommended as such in *A System of Meditation* and *The Five Basic Methods of Meditation* are: the six element practice, contemplation of conditionality via the 24 nidana chain, contemplation of impurity and decay, various types of recollection of impermanence and of death, (the latter usually done in the form of the root verses of the Bardo Thodol), *sunyata* meditations, and visualisation and mantra recitation. The *mula yogas*, as discussed above, can also be used to develop *vipashyana*. Likewise, there is in principle no reason why the Mindfulness of Breathing and *metta bhavana* cannot be used to develop *vipashyana* – although, again, this is not something that non Order members are encouraged to do. Furthermore Sangharakshita does not to have any objection to Order members taking up other traditional practices, such as reflection on the three *laksanas*, five *skandhas*, with a view to

¹⁴⁵ after Sangharakshita, *Q&A 1978 Order Convention*, dharmatranscripts, p.

¹⁴⁶ Sangharakshita, *A System of Meditation*

¹⁴⁷ Tejananda, *Notes on a Forum between members of the Preceptors' College and Council and the Vajraloka Teaching Team, Madhyamaloka, June 2000*, Articles Shabda, November 2000, section 2 and 5.

cultivating *vipashyana*.¹⁴⁸

Sangharakshita has commented that in cultivating *vipashyana*¹⁴⁹ we are effectively contemplating and experiencing one or more of the *laksanas* in some form or another within whatever practice we choose – the three *laksanas* (marks of conditioned existence) being: *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), *anitya* (impermanence), and *anatman* (insubstantiality). I recommend to the reader Sangharakshita's discussion of these in *The Three Jewels*.¹⁵⁰

Whatever our practice, it is likely that as our concentration deepens, we will focus, in effect, on one or another of the *laksanas*. Each of the three marks, though ultimately inseparable, provides the key, as it were, to one of three gateways to liberation (*vimoksa-mukha*) and thereby to our entry upon the Transcendental Path (*lokuttara marga*). By fathoming through insight the impermanence (*anitya*) of conditioned phenomena, we provide the conditions for the arising of the *animitta-samadhi* within which we see the Unconditioned as Signless; penetrating their unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), the *apranihita-samadhi* reveals the Aimless or Unbiased; penetrating their insubstantiality (*anatman*), the *sunyata-samadhi* reveals their Voidness or Emptiness.¹⁵¹

other practices?

Sangharakshita in presenting *A System of Meditation* talked of specific practices current within the Order and Movement of the time. However, as will be clear by now, in principle there is no reason why a great number of other meditation practices could not contribute to the successful undertaking of *A System of Meditation*.

For example, a form of mindfulness meditation that is beginning to find an increasing following is the sustained cultivation of and reflection on the mental events (*caitta dharmas*) as outlined in the

¹⁴⁸ after *ibid.*,

¹⁴⁹ Sangharakshita uses the Sanskrit rather than Pali form – *vipassana* – since the latter has connotations of Insight meditation traditions that he'd prefer to avoid.

¹⁵⁰ Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels – the central ideals of Buddhism*, Ch. 11, The Nature of Existence, Windhorse, 1998, pp. 72 – 84

¹⁵¹ Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels*, Ch. 14, The Goal, 1998, p. 113ff

Abhidharma. I won't go through the stages of the practice here, which in any case seems to have a variety of forms, but give a simple outline. After cultivating awareness of what constitutes our current experience, especially in terms of each omnipresent event (*sarvatraga*), we focus on our process of deepening awareness, by noting the arising of object determining events (*viniyatas*), as well as specifically choosing to cultivate one or more of the positive mental events (*kusala caitta dharma*). The deepening focus of attention and intensified reflection that this meditation encourages clearly predisposes it to becoming a *vipashyana* meditation.

'pure awareness'

The 'Pure Awareness' practice¹⁵² – referred to by some as 'Just Sitting practice' – is probably the most prominent example of a practice which some do not think has a place within Sangharakshita's *A System of Meditation*. This practice is different to the 'non' practice of just sitting Sangharakshita includes in *A System of Meditation*, as described in Section 2 of this booklet. (To follow up the details see the reference in the footnote.¹⁵³) Sangharakshita has not taught, to my knowledge, a Pure Awareness practice. In principle he has no objection to it being practised.

But does the Pure Awareness practice have a place within *A System of Meditation*, or not? In the view of some practitioners within the Order it does. Certainly I can see no reason why the Pure Awareness practice should not be a means to helping us integrate ourselves, or develop positive emotion, or indeed die and be reborn spiritually. Discussion below of the practice is introductory and does not do full justice to its scope, or how to actually practice it, especially in terms of cultivating *vipashyana*; for that, we will have to await treatment by a seasoned practitioner.

¹⁵² this practice has a number of antecedents in different traditions e.g. Vipassana, Dzogchen, Mo Chao of Chinese Ch'an, and Shikantaza of Japanese Zen traditions

¹⁵³ Tejananda, *Notes on a Forum between members of the Preceptors' College and Council and the Vajraloka Teaching Team, Madhyamaloka, June 2000*, Articles Shabda, November 2000; note that the June 2000 forum discussion, which Sangharakshita attended, supercedes Sangharakshita, *Just Sitting*, Shabda December 1999, p. 118

The Pure Awareness practice has been characterised as a ‘formless’ meditation to distinguish it from practices such as those Sangharakshita specifically recommended for use in *A System of Meditation*. It is formless in the sense *not* of having a prescribed set of stages to practise as, for example, in the five stages of *metta bhavana*. The Pure Awareness practice, in my understanding of it, is a form of mindfulness (*satipatthana*) meditation in which we simply sit being as fully aware as we can of whatever arises, moment by moment. What mainly distinguishes this practice in terms of method is the nature of the object of concentration: there is no principal object of concentration (as, for example, in the Mindfulness of Breathing, or *metta bhavana*), but rather an ongoing awareness of whatever presents itself from moment to moment to the senses (including the mind considered as a sense).

My understanding is that the majority of meditation practices practised in the Movement are, in the broadest sense of the term, developmental: our intention is to bring into being positive qualities that are not already present. At first sight, in the case of the Pure Awareness practice, it might appear that ‘pure awareness’ is a quality which we want to bring into being or enhance. And yet at the same time, paradoxically, we’re ‘doing’ this simply by allowing whatever is happening in our sensory field to happen – but, by not adding to or subtracting from our bare experience, we are not actually ‘doing’ anything. The paradox is resolved if we understand the distinctive view of what we’re doing in the pure awareness practice: that is, we think in terms of ‘opening’ to a quality which is, in a sense, already fully ‘there’. We are simply letting go, or ‘relaxing’ into an awareness in which the delusional activities of mind are non-operative. This awareness therefore ‘reveals’ mind itself, which is all that is really present all the time anyway. This contrasts with thinking in terms of cultivating a quality through time which we have ‘less of’ and wish to develop ‘more of’ – which is the more usual developmental view, and how we normally think about how we practise.¹⁵⁴

Although Sangharakshita has not taught the Pure Awareness practice, on occasion he has talked in ways which would suggest his

¹⁵⁴ after Tejananda, *Meditation: Just Sitting and the Language of ‘Space’ and ‘Time’*, Articles Shabda, November 1998, p. xxii ff

familiarity with at least the underlying principle, as for example in the following quote:

“This state of pure, pristine, non-deluded, awareness may seem a far cry from our everyday experience. But occasions do nevertheless arise when we are able to know things free from adventitious defilements, at least momentarily. You may sometimes experience a moment at the end of a session of meditation when you have just opened your eyes, and are content simply to sit there, before at last the mind starts to tick over more forcibly and desires start to make themselves known. You may have had the experience, too, of looking out upon nature with a comparatively innocent eye, not wanting to make use of things, or even to take a picture, but to appreciate the life around you for its own sake. But this state of mind does not become a regular feature until one enters onto the path of Insight. ... When we want a bit more out of our sense experience than the sense experience itself – that is where we get into trouble.”¹⁵⁵

“In the *Udana*, the Buddha gives exactly this teaching to the mendicant Bahiya: ‘then, Bahiya, thus you must train yourself: in the seen, there will be just the seen, in the heard just the heard, in the imagined just the imagined, in the cognized just the cognized. Thus you will have no ‘thereby’.’ If you see something, in other words, just see. Don’t read anything into the experience, just see what is there. If you do read anything into the experience, then that again is enough; don’t react to that. If thought is needed, says the Buddha, then fine, go ahead and think. But go straight from the question to the answer. Think and have done with it. Do not wander off along the way. If you become aware that you have wandered off, do not make a drama out of a crisis; let the critical moment of awareness be what it is and no more or less. The moment of awareness is the moment to be aware in, not an opportunity to speculate about the whys and wherefores of the situation. ‘Thus you will have no ‘thereby’’. There will in a sense be no meaning at all in the experience, because you won’t be asking for any such thing as a conceptual distinction between one thing and another. This bare attention sounds simple enough: just see; just think. But if you have tried to achieve such

¹⁵⁵ Sangharakshita, from edited manuscript of a seminar on the *Satipatthana Sutta* (see Note 5)

mental clarity, you will know how difficult it really is. It creates an awareness like a mirror, reflecting everything without distortion. Crucially, however – and this is what makes it so difficult – it should not be cold like a mirror. It should not be an alienated awareness that stands back from its objects, coolly looking on, without really experiencing its experience. It is a truly unfettered consciousness, known in the Vajrayana tradition as the wisdom of Aksobhya, the imperturbable deep blue Buddha of the five-Buddha mandala. His mirror-like wisdom is not the cold, hard surface from which experience simply bounces away, but a deeply responsive awareness, which still has no need to force its own views onto what arises in its depths.

“Turning for a moment from the eye to the ear, we may say that this pure, unadulterated awareness is like listening to music: if you try to linger over a particular passage, if you try to savour and enjoy it more, you lose touch with the music itself, which has to go on. In order for the music to continue, you have to let go of it. We tend to think that clinging on to bits of life – our array of attachments – is what life is about, but this is how we manage to spoil the music; we fail to appreciate the symphony of life because all we can hear is the sad tune in our head.”¹⁵⁶

– bodhisattvahood in time and space; Buddhahood in Eternity

Discussion in recent years has revolved around Tejananda’s *Just Sitting Retreat Talks*,¹⁵⁷ in which he presents a distinction of temporal and spatial approaches to meditating, the ‘Just Sitting’ or Pure Awareness practice being said to be the primary example of the latter. Here I put forward my own contribution to the discussion. To my mind there is a confusion in terminology which unhelpfully characterises the practices recommended in *A System of Meditation* as being entirely temporal in contradistinction to Pure Awareness practice being entirely spatial. We’ve already explored in Section 1 the “difference between spatial thinking, thinking in terms of space, and

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*,

¹⁵⁷ Tejananda, *Just Sitting Retreat Talks*, Articles Shabda, August 1998. p. 28 ff, and *Threads* contributions in following months’ editions. Tejananda, *Meditation: Just Sitting and the Language of ‘Space’ and ‘Time’*, Articles Shabda, November 1998, p. xxii ff

temporal thinking or dynamic thinking, thinking in terms of time,”¹⁵⁸ which is clearly stated in the lecture presenting *A System of Meditation*.

Important as the spatial-temporal distinction is, there is perhaps as significant and useful a distinction to be made in both how we think of our goal and our means to achieving it. Sangharakshita has discussed this in terms of time on the one hand, eternity on the other. Either we can think in terms our practice as a path leading through space and time to a goal. Or we can think of uncovering that which is hidden within us, that which is eternally there – i.e. that which is essentially timeless, and therefore beyond the dualism of time and space. The use of eternal here does not have a common connotation of indefinitely prolonged in time, but rather is used in the sense of being ‘outside’ or ‘beyond’ time altogether (using this spatial term metaphorically, of course).¹⁵⁹

It’s important to remember that time and space are not things in themselves. Although we usually think of space as a sort of box within which things move about, and time as a sort of line or tunnel along which things move, space and time are really forms of our perception. The whole point of the timeless – eternity – is that it isn’t a line; when we enter the dimension of eternity, we go beyond space and time, and therefore we go beyond samsara. But even to talk in this way is misleading, because it is not as if, being outside time, we have gone or are really outside anything.¹⁶⁰

Essentially “we have two principles: a principle of Buddhahood in the dimension of eternity, and a principle of Bodhisattvahood in the dimension of time. ... One represents perfection eternally complete, eternally achieved; the other represents perfection eternally in the process of achievement. And the one does not lead into the other; the two

¹⁵⁸ Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels – Women’s Q&A 1985*, Unedited Seminar On, dharmatranscripts, pp. (3J–180)

¹⁵⁹ after Sangharakshita *Who is the Buddha?*, Windhorse, 1994, p.151 ff, and Sangharakshita, *The Bodhisattva Ideal – Wisdom and Compassion in Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1999, p. 202ff, 210 ff

¹⁶⁰ after Sangharakshita *Who is the Buddha?*, Windhorse 1994, p.151 ff, and after Sangharakshita, *The Bodhisattva Ideal – Wisdom and Compassion in Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1999, p. 202ff, 210 ff

are discontinuous. ... We can't just say, "Time is illusory, merge it into eternity," or, "Eternity is illusory, merge it into time." They are both irreducibly there. We need to see everything as eternally achieved and at the same time eternally in the process of achievement. The Buddha sits eternally beneath the bodhi tree; he has always sat there and he always will. At the same time, so to speak, the Bodhisattva is eternally practising the Perfections, life after life, to infinity. Buddha and Bodhisattva represent different aspects of one, the same, reality."¹⁶¹

In contrasting these perspectives of time and eternity we have to "remember that metaphors are not to be taken literally; they are suggestive, and meant to stimulate or inspire, not to communicate in a clear-cut, scientific fashion. The danger is that we forget this and start trying to press them to logical conclusions. ... Contrary to our usual metaphorical mode of description, Enlightenment is not reached by following a path. But this doesn't mean that the path should not be followed. The path ... is in the dimension of time, ... the goal is in the dimension of eternity. We will never reach eternity by going on and on in time. That is, one does not arrive at eternity by an indefinite prolongation of time, any more than one can arrive at a two-dimensional figure by prolongation of a one-dimensional line. The two – eternity and time – goal and path – are by definition discontinuous, discrete. ... One reaches the end of the path within time, but one shouldn't think that one attains the goal in time: one attains the goal out of time or, ... the goal is eternally attained. ... Thus in our spiritual life we are trying all the time to achieve that which we already have. We have to do both: realise that we already have it, but at the same time go all out to achieve it."¹⁶²

epilogue

I have written and compiled this booklet on Sangharakshita's *A System of Meditation* to contribute to discussion on meditation within the Order and Movement. I have sought to accurately represent what I understand to be Sangharakshita's teaching. The booklet is neither comprehensive nor definitive, either with regard to meditation, or with regard to Sangharakshita's views – even if such were possible, it would be a considerably larger project. Many will wish to add their own particular voice to the discussion, drawing on the fruit of their own practice – and in particular, I hope, those Order members now using practices not specifically mentioned in *A System of Meditation*. As will be clear by now, I believe that in principle there is no reason why other meditation practices could not be included in this system. Finally, I trust that in revisiting *A System of Meditation*, each of us will be stimulated to review our own practice in the light of a fresh understanding of its implications: to re-evaluate whether what we are doing is taking us where we want to go; ensuring that we remain spiritually alive and moving in the direction of our goal.

¹⁶¹ Sangharakshita, *The Bodhisattva Ideal – Wisdom and Compassion in Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1999, p. 210 ff

¹⁶² *ibid.*, p. 202 ff

THE UNSEEN FLOWER

Compassion is far more than an emotion. It is something that springs
Up in the emptiness which is when you yourself are not there,
So that you do not know anything about it.
Nobody, in fact, knows anything about it
(If they knew, it would not be Compassion);
But they can only smell
The scent of the unseen flower
That blooms in the Heart of the Void.

Sangharakshita, Biharsharif, 19.2.1950

Appendices

Appendix No. 1: *A System of Meditation*¹⁶³

Upasakas and Upasikas: We start with a question, and the question is: Where did Buddhism come from? Don't say India! *[Laughter]* Where, more correctly, did the Dharma, the truth as communicated by the Buddha, come from?

The short and very simple answer to that question, we can say, is that Buddhism, that the Dharma, grew out of meditation, that it grew out of the Buddha's meditation under the Bodhi tree, two thousand and five hundred years ago; grew, that is to say, out of meditation in the deepest as well as in the highest sense – not simply out of meditation in the sense of concentration; not even out of meditation in the somewhat higher sense of the experience of higher states of consciousness, but out of meditation in the sense rather of what we call nowadays in English 'contemplation' Out of meditation in the sense of a direct, total, comprehensive, in fact, all-comprehending, vision and experience of Ultimate Reality. It's out of that that Buddhism grew, that the Dharma grew. And it is by renewed contact with that, that Buddhism or the Dharma continually refreshes itself down through the ages.

We can say that the FWBO and the WBO grew also out of meditation, even if not in that exalted sense. And I personally remember very well the days when the FWBO and the WBO were just growing; or even, I may say, just beginning to grow – when they just passed the virtually embryonic stage. I remember how we used to meet just once a week, on a Thursday, I think it was – Thursday evening at seven o'clock, subsequently changed to half past six – used to meet once a week in a tiny twelve by twelve (or was it ten by twelve?) basement beneath a shop in Monmouth Street, in central London not very far from – in fact, a stone's throw from – Trafalgar Square. And there used to be in those days, the very early days, just seven or eight of us, just meeting every week, Thursday, seven o'clock, six thirty, just meeting and just meditating. As far as I remember we didn't even have any chanting in those days; or, even if we did, not very much. We just met there, we meditated for an hour or so, we had a cup of tea afterwards and a biscuit,

[Laughter] and that weekly evening meeting was, in those days, the FWBO. Even the WBO had not yet come on the scene.

And gradually a few others joined us. We didn't advertise; we seemed to become known – a little known – by word of mouth. There was a poster up – a hand-written poster – in the window of the little shop, beneath which we used to meet. People passing by used to see it, used to venture into the shop on the pretext of buying incense; used to be inveigled sometimes downstairs into the basement to practise meditation, and a few of them stayed. So in this way, the little Movement; or the little class, I should say, grew. And after a while we started holding lectures – in fact series of public lectures – in hired halls in London. And then, greatly daring, we embarked upon our first retreats; and very, very pleased and satisfied with our success we were if some eighteen or twenty people turned up for a retreat; we thought that we were doing very well indeed.

And we went on that way for some year or two years or so, and in *that* way the whole Movement arose. But inasmuch as it all started with a meditation class held just once a week, we could say that the whole Movement arose out of meditation – arose as a result of those seven or eight, ten or twelve, then fifteen or twenty, people, meeting and meditating in that basement of a shop in Monmouth Street in Central London. I remember the scene very well indeed. I wonder how many of you do? Perhaps one or two or three at the very most. But I remember it very well indeed. I can see it in my mind's eye; I can even hear it. I can hear the traffic rumbling past upstairs! I can hear, also, people's footsteps passing to and fro above the grating almost immediately above my head. Little tripping footsteps of ladies, presumably, and the heavier, more solemn footsteps *[Laughter]* of men! But inside, inside that tiny, dimly lit basement shrine – The Triratna Shrine and Meditation Centre *[Laughter]*, as we called it – it was very quiet and very peaceful, especially when we were all meditating. And, you know, when I look back, when I think back, it's really quite surprising it is really quite astonishing, that we should have, you

¹⁶³ given on March 29th 1978 on the Order Convention held at Vinehall School, Robertsbridge, Sussex, UK, by Sangharakshita. – lecture 135 in the Dharmachakra catalogue, also available from www.dharmatranscripts.com