

Three Myths of the Spiritual Life

Subhuti

Immanence versus Transcendence

The topic I am addressing here is one that I have thought a great deal about and it is very important to me. I want to articulate something that is founded in my own experience, and to do so in a way that I haven't attempted before.

At the 2003 International Convention of the Western Buddhist Order, when I gave the talk from which this essay has developed, I entitled it 'Immanence versus Transcendence'. That was a little mischievous. This pair of terms derives from Christian theology, and sums up the two poles of a longstanding Christian debate about the relation of God to His creation: does He dwell beyond the world, or within it (and indeed within us)? This question may not seem very relevant to Buddhists, yet our tradition presents us with a roughly comparable dilemma: is Buddhahood — full and perfect enlightenment — something far beyond our present mundane consciousness (and therefore something that we must strive towards gradually)? Or is it, on the contrary, as near to us as our heartbeat — something so naturally part of us that we habitually ignore it?

The title that I gave that talk was partly prompted by the recent use within the Order of the terms 'immanence and transcendence' to discuss our own assumptions about the nature of enlightenment, and in particular to challenge what some see as the dominance of 'transcendence' in the FWBO's outlook to date. Arguably at least, this dominance has led us to emphasise — perhaps a bit one-sidedly — the 'developmental model' of spiritual life. To redress this imbalance, some of us have recently become rather interested in 'immanence' — the idea that enlightenment is already implicit within our experience, and what we have to do is simply allow it to reveal itself. In my case, this interest has led me to investigate those elements of the Buddhist tradition that take an 'immanent' view of enlightenment, especially the Tathagatagarbha ('embryo of the tathagata') doctrine.

Our teacher Sangharakshita has always been wary of the language of immanence, and especially of the Tathagatagarbha doctrine. He sees dangers in the idea that one is the Buddha already. Yet Bhante has also taught what amounts to the same approach, using different terms — terms that, in his view, avoid those dangers. Indeed, in my opinion he has taught it very effectively. But I will have more to say about that later.

As the language of 'immanence versus transcendence' derives from Christian theology, it is not really a very satisfactory medium for debating this issue in a Buddhist context. Although analogies can be drawn from one tradition to the other, we cannot borrow Christian terminology without also importing Christian associations that are not relevant in this context. I took the phrase 'immanence versus transcendence' as the title of my original talk only because those terms were already being used to discuss these issues within the Order (and perhaps because I wanted to be a little provocative!) But one of

the things I intend to do in this article is develop a more appropriate vocabulary to talk about these things.

Before embarking on that task, however, I want to speak in personal terms about my relation to what we are (provisionally) calling 'immanence'.

It just was...

I suppose that in the eyes of many people in the F/WBO I am strongly identified with the developmental model. I have certainly taught primarily from that model for many years and I must say that I have found it a very effective — even indispensable — tool. Nevertheless, I have never regarded it as the only possible approach. What is more, although I have not used the language of immanence much in my teaching, it has always been important to me personally because it seems the best way to understand and express some of my most precious experiences.

Some of those experiences pre-date my encounter with Buddhism. In the late 1960s, psychedelic drugs gave me glimpses of a state that could best be described in terms of immanence. I had experiences in which I seemed to see very clearly the fundamental truth of things. The vision that came to me in those moments wasn't something that had to be thought about or worked on. It just revealed itself. What's more, it was impossible to say whether the truth I perceived was 'in me' or 'out there': it just was. And stranger still, it wasn't as if this vision hadn't been before, but was now: I saw that it always had been. To become aware of it was to recognise it as something that had been waiting unnoticed, all the time, in the background of my experience. Even in my everyday misunderstanding of reality, reality had somehow been implicit all along.

In such moments, despite having woken up to the truth, I still couldn't have described it very clearly to anyone else. But there was one thing I felt sure of: I could never forget it. It seemed as if there was no possibility of a reversion. The experience seemed so natural and spontaneous: how could one possibly lose it? And yet, as the days went by — and as I tried to tell people about what had happened — I realised that I was getting further away from the experience itself.

There were in fact several of these experiences, and some of them were shared with friends who are also now in the Order. In the course of trying to make sense of all this, we came across Buddhism — and especially Zen Buddhism — which confirmed and articulated this sense of the true nature of things as something 'immanent'.

Then I encountered the FWBO and Sangharakshita. Bhante's approach to teaching was very varied in those early days, and (as we will see later) the idea of 'immanence' was by no means absent from it. For example, his talks on the Tantric path [1]made a strong impact on me because in them he sometimes spoke in such terms, and his words seemed to point towards the kind of experience I had been having.

As time went by, however, Bhante spoke less in these terms, and emphasised the developmental model more and more — especially the 'path of regular steps' [2].

Nevertheless, there were occasions (especially in question-and-answer sessions and small study groups, when he was away from more 'public' contexts) when something in the way he taught — indeed something in the way he was — gave me a sense of the immediacy of ultimate truth. Hand in hand with this went a sense of spiritual community being likewise 'immanent' — something to be 'soaked in' rather than striven for or created.

I experienced all this particularly strongly during the ordination course for men held at Il Convento, near Grosseto in Tuscany in 1981. It wasn't so much what Bhante was communicating explicitly — more a sort of tone, reverberating in everything that he said, that was redolent of this 'immanent' reality.

I remember especially that one night he read to us Evans-Wentz's translation of *The Yoga of Knowing the Mind*, which is ascribed to Padmasambhava. That translation — flawed though we now know it to be does convey something of the fundamental perspective of the text: the insight that the ultimate truth is present in all experience. And as I listened, it struck me that Bhante really understood the text. It was obvious that he was completely at one with what he was reading to us. And as I listened to him, I felt that I too was at one with it. Every word seemed to come from that experience of reality-as-immediately-present.

I didn't really know what to do with these experiences, but they continued to come, and even to develop. Another significant stage came when Bhante introduced me to the Manjusri Stuti Sadhana — the visualisation of Manjusri, the bodhisattva of wisdom. The text of the sadhana instructs the practitioner, near the end of the meditation, to dissolve Manjusri into the heart, and then to 'become absorbed in samadhi, for as long as it abides in the state of quiescence and insight brought about by the actuality of the two non-selfhoods (of personality and of dharmas).' In other words, one is asked to just sit, allowing an experience to unfold naturally and spontaneously. In discussing the sadhana, Bhante commented that this samadhi wasn't something one had 'earned' through one's efforts; it wasn't a vipaka (a product of karma). In the technical terms of the Vajrayana, the sadhana is at the level of the kriyayoga, but the experience is at the level of the atiyoga. In discussing this part of the sadhana, Bhante emphasised, that one should not make any effort, but just allow the experience to unfold. As time went on, I gave more emphasis to this aspect of the practice, and sure enough, I did experience a sense of reality unfolding naturally, without any conscious effort on my part. It was just there, and then gradually it would fade away.

While I was in the midst of that experience, I felt I didn't need anything: I was beyond all dukkha — free of all suffering or lack — for dukkha comes from craving, and craving had ceased. How could there be craving when there was nothing to crave? I have had similar experiences with the Vajrasattva practice, which seems to have the same

implication (perhaps all the sadhanas have, but those are the two that I know best). For me, these experiences marked the beginning of a process that is still going on today.

Perhaps I should emphasise that I don't accord these experiences any status or locate them on any scale of attainment. Indeed, I have serious reservations about the whole business of grading one's spiritual experience, which can lead to pride and confuse other people. I only mean to say that these events were significant for me in the sense that they became — and remain — the basis for my spiritual life. Or perhaps I should just say 'for my life': I try to live by the light that they shed, and feel more or less successful in that attempt.

Tathagatagarbha and poetic philosophy

As a result of such experiences, I naturally became interested in those texts in the Buddhist tradition that seem to relate to them. Two particularly important encounters with classical texts on 'immanence' have come my way in recent years. They came in a rather roundabout way — as a consequence of the deterioration of Sangharakshita's eyesight. Because Bhante can no longer read, I (and others) sometimes read aloud to him. At one time, he asked me to read *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* — a key text in the Chinese Tathagatagarbha tradition.

The act of reading it to Bhante made a profound impression on me. Perhaps this was partly because I felt that I was giving him something in return for everything he had given me, but more fundamentally it was because his acute attentiveness somehow activated my own powers of receptivity — with the result that many passages from *The Awakening of Faith* impressed themselves on my mind deeply:

The Dharmakaya of the Buddhas, being one and the same everywhere, is omnipresent. Since the Buddhas are free from any fixation of thought, their acts are said to be 'spontaneous'. They reveal themselves in accordance with the mentalities of all the various sentient beings. The mind of the sentient being is like a mirror. Just as a mirror cannot reflect images if it is coated with dirt, so the Dharmakaya cannot appear in the mind of the sentient being if it is coated with the dirt [of defilements]. [3]

Subsequently, I also read aloud to Bhante the *Srimaladevisimhanada Sutra* — 'The Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala'. This sutra is one of the canonical foundations of the Tathagatagarbha doctrine. It is a very difficult text to read aloud, and even more difficult to understand, but it led me further into the teaching. I was struck by (among many other things) Queen Srimala's exposition of the intrinsic purity of the mind:

Lord, samsara is based on the Tathagatagarbha. It was with reference to the Tathagatagarbha that the Lord pointed out and explained, '[It is] without limit in the past.' Since there is the Tathagatagarbha, there is a reason for speaking of 'cyclical flow' (samsara). Lord, as to 'cyclical flow,' no sooner do the sense organs for perception pass away than it [the Tathagatagarbha] takes hold of sense organs for perception, and that is 'cyclical flow.' Lord, the two natures, 'passing away' and 'rebirth', are conventional

terminology for the Tathagatagarbha. Lord, 'perished' and 'reborn' are conventional terminology for the world (loka). 'Perished' is the loss of the senses. 'Born' is the renewal of the senses. But, Lord, the Tathagatagarbha is not born, does not die, does not pass away to become reborn. The Tathagatagarbha excludes the realm with the characteristic of the constructed. The Tathagatagarbha is permanent, steadfast, eternal... [4]

After these encounters with The Awakening of Faith and The Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala — both impressed so vividly upon me by the act of reading them aloud to Bhante — I began reading more widely around the Tathagatagarbha doctrine, consulting several modern scholarly discussions. I don't claim to have read exhaustively or to be very knowledgeable, but I have come to some conclusions.

One conclusion is that, from a strict philosophical point of view, the Tathagatagarbha doctrine is unsatisfactory. It leaves a number of intellectual problems unresolved, and perhaps un-resolvable. The biggest problem is analogous to the one at the heart of Christian theodicy, i.e. 'If God is good, why does he allow evil?' In the Buddhist context, this comes out as 'if wisdom is natural, spontaneous and essential, how does ignorance arise?' To my mind, the attempt to resolve this problem doctrinally produces some almost absurd convolutions [5]. Perhaps such attempts have a value for practitioners who are wholly immersed in the Tathagatagarbha tradition, but I am not sure what value they have for others.

But despite such problems, I have no doubt at all that the Tathagatagarbha tradition is trying to express something very important — something that may indeed be indispensable as a corrective to the apparent nihilism of stricter forms of Buddhist philosophy. In order to burrow underneath the logical difficulties, and get at this 'something', it may help us to differentiate between two kinds of 'philosophising', both of which can be found within Buddhist thought (and elsewhere). Sangharakshita himself has drawn this distinction (as I have explained in my book on his thought.) [6] However, more recently I have found a very useful exposition of what amounts to the same idea in Schopenhauer.[7]

In essence, Schopenhauer's point is that there are two kinds of philosophy. He calls one of them 'rational philosophy'. This is concerned with the objective pole of experience — that is, with the 'external world' that we share — and it proceeds by examining and analysing that experience by logical means. When pursued long and hard enough, this kind of philosophy inevitably leads to the reasoned delineation of the limits of reason — the recognition of a point at which one cannot take rational thought any further because one has reached the limits of the 'machinery' of reason.

But Schopenhauer says that there is also something that he calls 'illuminist philosophy' (a very suggestive term). This is concerned with the subjective pole of experience. While rational philosophy relies on the data of the senses, the domain of illuminist philosophy is the inner 'sense', which — according to Schopenhauer — we experience primarily as our will or volition. [8]

Tantalisingly, however, Schopenhauer doesn't pursue this any further. He thinks that there is nothing more he can say about 'illuminist' philosophy, precisely because it is to do with the subjective pole of experience. As such, it offers no objective basis for a shared language, with which we might talk about it. For Schopenhauer, philosophy must be communicable and rational.

But there is another kind of communication that takes over at this point. It is not 'philosophy' at all in the usual sense. Or perhaps we might call it 'poetic philosophy'. It is not the strict use of reason, but the imaginative use of concepts, or perhaps symbols, to express an experience that is essentially 'inner' rather than 'outer'. It can lead, for instance, to the kind of grand mythic system found in the poetry of William Blake (although, unlike Blake, I believe that both sorts of philosophy — rational and poetic — have a part to play in our spiritual life).

The point I want to make about the Tathagatagarbha doctrine is that, although it may seem to present itself as rational philosophy, it is really in my opinion a form of poetic philosophy — an attempt to express in poetic terms a truth that cannot be pinned down rationally. We therefore make a mistake if we dismiss the Tathagatagarbha texts as if they were bad rational philosophy. We may fall into that error when we ask, 'If we are all Buddhas from the start, how is it that ignorance arises?' We will never get a satisfactory answer, because that kind of question belongs to rational philosophy.

Buddhist philosophy began — and went on for a long while — primarily in the rational mode. It began, in particular, with such teachings as conditioned co-production (*pratitya samutpada*) and insubstantiality (*anatman*). The Buddha's disciples elaborated his teachings — particularly his analytical teachings about the mind. Their work was codified in the *Abhidharma*, where it gained something in detail and thoroughness, but lost something of its original wholeness: existence was now defined in terms of a finite range of psychophysical elements (*dharma*s), and as these seemed incapable of further analysis, there was a tendency to think of them as 'real'. But then came another wave of rational analysis in the form of *Madhyamaka* philosophy, of which Nagarjuna was the grand master. While its specific target was the tendency to reify the *dharma*s, the *Madhyamaka* analysis had the broader effect of demonstrating that all philosophical positions are at best relative. They are simply attempts to catch in the net of reason what lies beyond reason.

In fact, the Buddha himself, right at the beginning, had already said as much. For example in the *Brahmajala Sutta*, he says that there are matters (meaning the Transcendental essence of the *Dharma*) that he himself can see, but which are 'deep, hard to see, peaceful, excellent, beyond the reach of reason, subtle, to be experienced [only] by the wise'. He uses the same words again in, for example, the *Aggivachagotta Sutta*, which discusses the fourteen 'inexpressibles'. Being 'beyond the reach of reason', such matters must be beyond rational philosophy.

The message of the Madhyamaka is not that we can't express reality in words at all, but we can't avoid being misunderstood, and we can't exhaust all that could be said. It is not necessarily that what we say is wrong, just that it can always be taken in a sense different or even opposite to the one we intend. One cannot guard against misunderstanding.

The Madhyamaka philosophy tried to avoid this problem by confining itself to criticising the nihilism or eternalism implicit in any statement about the nature of things. But although nihilism was one of the targets of the Madhyamaka's critique, that critique itself gave rise to a subtle sense of negation.

This is why poetic philosophy arose in the Buddhist context. The Madhyamaka discourse had been so successful in delineating the limits of reason that it must have seemed that there was no way for Buddhist philosophy to move forward. This problem was solved by the bold expedient of departing from a strictly rational approach and leaping into 'poetic philosophy'. The Yogacara doctrine of 'mind only' was one such leap, and the Tathagatagarbha doctrine (which emerged from the Yogacara) was another.

However — and this is a crucial point — these leaps did not constitute a rejection of the Madhyamaka. In fact the leaps were, in a sense, supported by the Madhyamaka philosophy, which was the platform that made the leaps possible. In any attempt to study the Yogacara or Tathagatagarbha doctrines today, we must keep that fact in mind. If we ignore the platform we will misunderstand the leap. Historically, the strictly rational philosophy of the Madhyamaka was the basis of the poetic philosophy of the Yogacara and Tathagatagarbha

What this means is that as long as we have our feet firmly planted in the Madhyamaka — planted in the void, strange as that may seem — we can benefit from allowing ourselves to think of reality poetically. We can, for example, speak of indwelling 'Buddha nature', so long as we keep dissolving that 'Buddha nature' back into sunyata, and so avoid imputing to it a delusive inherent existence. In short, we have to keep to the Middle Way between eternalism and nihilism, difficult though that is. We will thereby follow the example of the best exponents of Yogacara and Tathagatagarbha, who always refer their ideas back to Madhyamaka philosophy.

Views and myths

By this stage, some readers might be feeling a bit uncomfortable with these complex abstractions. However, while we don't all have to be philosophy students, each of us does need at least a rough and ready 'philosophy' to guide our spiritual lives: a working notion of what we are doing, a 'right view' that we can trust to lead us in more or less the right direction. To have no such view really amounts to nihilism and therefore to spiritual stagnation. Without a view, we lack any basis for practice and reflection. But at the same time we need to remember that our view is not identical with the truth, and it may — if we don't use it advisedly — lead us away from the truth, rather than towards it.

I think of the 'big' views that shape our approach to the spiritual life as myths. We could also call them 'models' — as we do when we speak of 'the developmental model' — but that word seems to me too redolent of empirical science, and rather short on imaginative appeal. Even when Buddhist views take the form of rational philosophy they do their deepest work by appealing to the spiritual imagination, not just the rational intellect. The views through which we lead the spiritual life are, to my mind, less like scientific models than mythic patterns waiting to be activated somewhere in the depths of our minds.

I will therefore speak of 'myths'. Obviously, I am using the word 'myth' in a metaphorical sense: We are not dealing with 'tales of gods and heroes', but of accounts of the way things are — accounts that may not be literally true in all particulars, but nevertheless have a profound and universal significance.

The fictional connotation of the word 'myth' may also be useful, reminding us not to take our view of the spiritual life too literally. It is all right to devote oneself enthusiastically to a particular myth, but wise, too, to keep some sense that there are other myths — stories quite different from (and even at odds with) the one that presently captivates us. If we remember that, we run less risk of getting into trouble by clinging too tightly to our chosen myth.

The point is that every myth has a 'front' and a 'back'. The front is the truth that we are trying to grasp by means of the myth; the back is the spiritual dead end that the myth leads to if we believe in it too literally or exclusively. I call the two aspects 'the front' and 'the back' because they are inseparable, like the two sides of a coin. I suspect that we can't benefit from the front of our favourite myth without also suffering at least a little from the back. The trick is to be on the watch for that, to bear in mind that the myth (the meaningful story) is also a myth (a fiction, not a literal truth), and only one of a range of alternative myths.

The three myths

Having entered those caveats, I will try to define the major mythic patterns of Buddhism — the range of views that the Buddhist tradition offers us about the nature of the spiritual life. These mythic patterns all have the same root and to understand them we must first examine that root.

Buddhism begins with the Buddha. This is a statement not just about history, but also about the fundamental premise on which the practice of Buddhism must be based: the state of enlightenment can be attained because the Buddha attained it, and then told us about it. Buddhism thus begins with the Buddha, and what this signifies is the necessity of faith in the possibility of Buddhahood — of full and perfect enlightenment.

But to say that Buddhism begins with the Buddha isn't adequate. It lacks something vital. Buddhism begins not only with the Buddha but also with 'me'. It begins, in other

words, with the gap between one's potential experience (enlightened) and one's present experience (not enlightened). The practice of Buddhism consists in closing that gap so that the Buddha and 'me' are one (or, more strictly, not two).

There are various ways of conceiving the nature of that gap and how to close it. Whichever way we choose will have consequences: it will open doors, but in doing so it may also bring masonry down on our heads. For example, if we choose to think of the Buddha as very distant, we may feel inspired to practise effectively, but it is equally possible that we will feel inadequate and disheartened. On the other hand, if we think of the distance between 'me' and the Buddha as very small, or even as illusory, that may bring us the confidence that we need to break through, or it may simply inflate our ego dangerously.

These are some of the psychological consequences of the way we choose to think about the gap. But our choice will also bring methodological consequences different ideas about what we should do in order to close the gap (do we need to strive hard, or learn to relax?) Likewise there will be 'social' consequences (do we need the supporting framework of a carefully selected and closely knit sangha, or can we just trust in our power to relate meaningfully to kindred spirits on the basis of what we truly are?) Not only that, but our choice will also affect our moral outlook (should we trust our intuition of what is right, or should we adhere carefully to moral rules?) In all these ways, any option we choose is bound to have consequences.

But what options are actually available? At first glance, there seem to be two fundamental ways in which one can think about closing the gap between the Buddha and 'me'.

The first way can be encapsulated in the phrase 'I become the Buddha'. This approach requires us to make an effort to change ourselves so that we become more and more like the Buddha. This way of thinking underpins the 'developmental model' of the spiritual life.

The second view can be summed up as 'The Buddha becomes me'. That is, one allows oneself to be 'taken over' by the Buddha (though obviously, I am not speaking of the historical person Shakyamuni). But here we need to distinguish two versions. The first is that the Buddha takes me over, from 'outside'. This idea is eloquently expressed in the *Bodhicharyavatara*, where Santideva says,

I give my entire self wholly to the Conquerors and to their sons. Take possession of me, sublime beings; out of devotion, I am your slave. [9]

Santideva is here expressly thinking in terms of giving his mundane personality as a vehicle through which the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas can work. This version of 'The Buddha-becomes-me' is thus essentially one of surrender. It has several variants: one might think in terms of surrender not so much to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as to a supra-personal force or principle—the Bodhicitta, for instance. At the other extreme,

some people think in terms of surrendering themselves to an actual living person—a human guru—whom they regard as the Buddha.

But the second version of the 'Buddha-becomes-me' approach is very different. Here, one thinks of the Buddha not as coming from 'outside', but as emerging from 'within'. This is where such teachings as the Tathagatagarbha doctrine fit into the scheme. In this case, Buddhahood is understood as having been one's own deepest nature from the very start. All one needs to do is to wake up to that fact.

Indeed, the metaphor of awakening, always present in Buddhism, really comes into its own here. In waking up from sleep, you don't strive to attain anything that isn't yours already. Nor do you have to submit yourself to any external power — whether an archetypal Buddha, a supra-personal 'force', or a human guru. The waking state is your natural condition, yours by right, so to speak. All you have to do is wake up by shaking off the shallow dream that you are not enlightened. It is like pulling a blindfold off your eyes, or taking a mask off your face.

This approach is therefore one of discovery. One could also speak of it in terms of emergence, which would further emphasise what one might call the passive mood of this myth. (In order to 'discover' something, one may still have to do some active searching, but the concept of 'emergence' suggests that one is simply allowing something to happen, quite independent of one's will. However, I won't elaborate this distinction here, and will simply speak of 'self-discovery'.)

The myth of self-discovery points to the transcendence of duality here and now. In doing so, it boldly appropriates the language of those who are highly developed and those who have utterly surrendered.

What at first sight seemed to be two thus turns out, on closer inspection, to be three distinct views — or myths, as I prefer to call them. In a nutshell, one can conceive the Buddhist spiritual life in terms of self-development, or self-surrender, or self-discovery. Each of these three myths is embodied in more than one form in Buddhist tradition. Thus we have three 'families' of myths about Buddhist spiritual life, although of course they don't necessarily appear in forms that exclude one another.

The three myths in the Buddhist tradition

I want to suggest — rather tentatively — that the three myths can very approximately be correlated with the three yanas. The Hinayana focuses on the myth of self-development. The Mahayana, while continuing to use that myth, also brings to the fore the myth of self-surrender. The Vajrayana — in its higher forms, though perhaps not in the lower — gives primacy to the myth of self-discovery.

Let's look at that a bit more closely. The Hinayana — perhaps it is better to speak of the Buddhism of the Pali Canon (or 'Pali Buddhism' for short) — conceives the spiritual life in terms of constant effort to move along the path of morality, meditation and wisdom.

The Pali scriptures speak frequently of 'striving', and that striving is said to consist essentially of the four right efforts: abandoning and preventing unwholesome mental states, while cultivating and preserving wholesome ones. For Pali Buddhism, the spiritual life is thus an arduous attempt to change oneself — to create a new, wholesome and enlightened consciousness to replace one's (relatively) unwholesome and unenlightened present consciousness.

Self-development remains vitally important in the Mahayana, of course, but one of the Mahayana's crucial innovations is a glorious pantheon of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, regarded as constantly present on a higher plane, and actively working for our good — divine powers, to whose compassionate influence we can, if we choose, open ourselves. These enlightened deities therefore become the objects of ritual worship and invocation. Such devotional activities, no longer a sop to the laity (as in Pali Buddhism), now become an obligation for the serious practitioner. In this way, the spirit of surrender permeates the whole Mahayana — a tendency that culminates in Pure Land Buddhism.

The myth of self-surrender continues in the Vajrayana, at least in the lower Tantras (which are, in a sense, continuous with the Mahayana), where practitioners try to let the Buddha or Bodhisattva take them over, endowing them with enlightened consciousness.

But in the higher Tantras — that is, in the Indo-Tibetan Vajrayana traditions of Mahamudra and Dzogchen — we find a shift to the myth of self-discovery. Dzogchen, for example, the highest teaching of the Tibetan Nyingma school, speaks in terms of the intrinsic purity of the mind. The essential aim of Dzogchen practice is not so much to develop an enlightened mind, as to recognise that ever-present purity.

Obviously, my correlation of the three myths with the three yanas is valid only as a rough and ready generalisation. For one thing, the myth of self-discovery is not found only in the higher Tantras. It also manifests in the Tathagatagarbha doctrine, a teaching set out in a group of Mahayana sutras, the basic position of which is that the mental defilements that bind us to samsara are really no more than veils concealing the underlying, pure Buddha-nature. The self-discovery myth is also of fundamental importance in the Chan and Zen traditions. For example, in Hui Neng's Platform Sutra, the emergence of Buddhahood is compared to the emergence of the moon from clouds.

My rough-and-ready correlation of the three myths with the three yanas also has to be qualified in other ways. The picture is really much more complicated. In fact, we can discern the presence, explicit or implicit, of all three myths in each yana, and perhaps even in each individual school or tradition within each yana. Where a myth is not present in a tradition as its dominant train of thought, it may still be present in other ways, perhaps implicitly expressed in aspects of the language, or in subsidiary strands of the tradition that supplement and counterbalance its main narrative.

For instance, while Pali Buddhism mostly uses the language of self-development, we also find in the Pali Suttas a powerful atmosphere of faith in the Tathagata. For example, Ananda, Sariputta and the other prominent disciples open themselves to the

guidance of their Blessed Lord in a spirit of deep reverence and trust — a mood that can fairly be described as one of self-surrender. One also finds in the Pali Canon some suttas that invite interpretation in terms of the self-discovery myth. For example, in the Udana we find the Buddha speaking of the existence of ‘a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded’ whose existence is what alone makes possible ‘escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded’. [10]

Thus, although the myth of self-development is the leitmotif of Pali Buddhism, we can also hear within it — playing in the background as a kind of harmony or counterpoint — the myths of self-surrender and self-development.

Conversely, the self-surrender and self-discovery myths do not exclude the self-development myth at the level of practice, or even at the level of discourse. As we have seen, Santideva speaks sometimes in terms of surrendering himself to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but he also says, for example, ‘I shall strive to follow the training as it has been taught.’ [11]

His discourse thus combines self-surrender with self-development. Likewise, the Chan and Zen schools, whose central discourse is one of self-discovery, still require an open-ended commitment to hard spiritual work — lots of za-zen or koan-pondering — and in that sense their practice incorporates something akin to the self-development myth, although in this case the effort is conceived as tending towards a sudden breakthrough rather than a gradual growth or flowering.

It therefore seems that if we wish to understand a tradition in depth, we need to look beyond the myth expressed at the level of doctrine, and try to detect the presence of the other two myths at other levels. If they don’t manifest in the explicit teaching, they may nevertheless be implicit in the practices, or as a kind of mood in the language. Each school may seem to emphasise one myth to the apparent exclusion of the others, but if we look closer we will sometimes — perhaps always — find each of the other two, if only in subtle forms.

Who can say why one myth becomes the keynote of a particular tradition, while the other two are only heard as harmonies? Perhaps the choice of emphasis is a response to the circumstances in which the tradition first emerged — the culture of the time and place, and the needs of the particular individuals who gathered around the teacher.

The three myths in Sangharakshita’s teaching

I think all this applies as much to the FWBO as it does to any of the traditional schools. Let’s look at the part played by the three myths in Sangharakshita’s teaching.

The essence of the myth of self-development is the idea that one must exert will in order to move oneself up the ladder of spiritual evolution, that the spiritual life must be led by the individual systematically and with discipline. We are called on to renounce certain things, and to cultivate others. In Sangharakshita’s teaching, this myth is the dominant

one. It is embodied 'philosophically', for example, in Bhante's ideas about the Higher Evolution and the need to become a True Individual. On the more practical side, it is expressed in his emphasis on such things as the path of regular steps and the desirability of creating 'supportive conditions' — changing one's lifestyle as far as possible to make it conducive to spiritual growth. It is also very evident in his progressive 'system of meditation' through which one is meant to start by developing integration and positive emotion (samatha) and then progress through spiritual death to spiritual rebirth (vipasyana).

From the viewpoint of the myth of self-surrender, the spiritual life consists in giving yourself up to a larger consciousness, which is conceived — at least to begin with — as lying beyond you. Sangharakshita has strongly encouraged this approach, too, through the practice of puja. Of course, Bhante has also spoken of puja in the language of self-development — as a practice that helps us to cultivate the skilful mental state of faith. In fact, this is the way we usually introduce puja to beginners, and we may continue to think of it in such a way. However, for many of us, puja sooner or later awakens a sense of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as objective powers, 'out there'. And actually this is the more traditional — and perhaps the more natural and effective — way of regarding them.

Bhante has also fostered the myth of self-surrender by encouraging Order members to take up meditations that involve the visualisation of a Buddha or Bodhisattva. For Bhante himself, such practices were a very important step in his spiritual life. From 1956, when he was initiated by Chetel Sangye Dorje into the sadhana of Green Tara, he felt that his 'whole higher life was guided from that higher dimension'. [12]

Thirdly, there is the myth of self-discovery. According to this myth, there is in reality nothing to attain or surrender: Buddhahood is already there within each of us, and we simply have to recognise it. This third myth is less apparent in Bhante's teaching than the other two. He has been relatively reticent about it, for reasons that I will mention later.

Yet despite this reticence, the myth of self-discovery has been a force in his spiritual life. Indeed, Bhante's description of his initial conversion to Buddhism seems to imply that the myth of self-discovery played a crucial part in it. He has said more than once that when, at the age of sixteen, he read the Diamond Sutra and the Platform Sutra, he realised that he was a Buddhist and always had been. I take Bhante's use of the word 'always' here quite literally. I also think it significant that the Platform Sutra — one of the milestones in Buddhism's literature of self-discovery was one of the texts that prompted his conversion. (The Diamond Sutra, by the way, was the chief inspiration for the Platform Sutra.) As I have said, in my personal communication with Bhante, I have experienced a strong sense of the truth as something immediately present.

In addition to his personal connection with it, the myth of self-discovery is in fact represented in Bhante's teaching to a greater extent than we may realise.

For example, it emerges quite strongly at points in his lectures on the myths and parables of the Lotus Sutra (published in book form as *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment*), especially in the talk on 'the myth of the return journey'. This story (which, to western ears, inevitably sounds reminiscent of the Christian parable of the prodigal son) tells of a rich man and his estranged son. The son is so degraded by years of wandering and poverty that when — one day in his travels — he sees a splendidly arrayed man sitting in the doorway of an enormous house, he does not recognise this magnificent stranger as his own father.

Commenting on this, Bhante suggests that the father and son symbolise respectively the higher and the lower self. (He immediately warns us not to take these terms too literally.) Although the son does not know the father, the father immediately recognises his son. And at this point, Bhante quotes the Sutra's statement that the father has been 'thinking of his son all the time', and he goes on to comment on that statement in a way that — in view of his customary wariness of 'immanence' — is noteworthy:

Although we may completely forget the higher self, the higher self never forgets us. But at the same time — this is the mystery — we are it. An image may make this clear. Imagine an enormous subterranean chamber all lit up from within. We are living in a tiny chamber next to — indeed part of — the big one. A pane of glass which is transparent only from one side separates the two chambers, so that although someone in the large illuminated chamber could see everything going on in the little chamber, from the little chamber we can see nothing at all of what is going on in the large chamber. In fact we have no idea that there is a large chamber. But although cramped in our little chamber, we may forget, even be oblivious to, the existence of the large chamber, the large chamber always has a window onto the little chamber. Even though the lower self forgets the higher self, the higher self is the higher self of the lower self. [13]

Bhante returns to the same territory throughout his lecture series on the Lotus Sutra. For example, in discussing the parable of the man who is unaware that he is carrying a precious jewel tied into his garment, Bhante explains the jewel as signifying 'the true self, one's own true being [which] is self-luminous, conscious, aware.' [14]

In subsequent seminar discussions (printed, in the book version, as appendices to each chapter), Bhante seems to retreat a little from these statements, as if in the interval he had become more aware of the dangers that they carry within them. In relation to the idea of higher and lower selves, for example, he proposes a sort of compromise position: we can think of the higher self as a sort of mundane 'guardian angel' — a *punya devata* in Buddhist terminology. And at this point he says quite clearly:

The language which speaks of thinking that you are already a Buddha is dangerous and to be avoided [15]

Facing another question about the idea that 'one is already a Buddha', he cautiously replies,

No doubt it does express an actual spiritual experience at a certain level, but anyone who is not very spiritually advanced is likely to misunderstand, and would be better off hearing that, by making sufficient effort, they can eventually attain a state called enlightenment. [16]

It seems that Bhante was trying to steer a difficult middle way: on the one hand, he saw the need to acknowledge that the Transcendental is in some way 'immanent' that there is a real sense in which the object of our spiritual search is discovered rather than developed. On the other, he was keen to dissuade his disciples from getting too interested in an approach that might seriously mislead them. Whatever 'immanence' might mean, Bhante is sure what it does not mean:

...It is not as if there is just a thin layer separating you from Buddhahood, so that you have just got to get through that layer and hey presto! There you are, Enlightened. It is a big mistake to think of immanent Buddhahood as any kind of possession. [17]

A systematic examination of Bhante's teachings would probably reveal many more expressions of the myth of self-discovery, together with many careful qualifications of the idea, but I think that those I have quoted are enough to show that Bhante has by no means denied or ignored that myth, even if he has given greater emphasis to the other two myths, and generally shunned the more extreme formulations of the self-discovery myth (in particular, the idea that each of us 'is the Buddha already').

The examples that I have cited show Bhante's use of the myth of self-discovery mainly at the level of doctrine. But at the level of practice, too, the myth of self-discovery is present in teaching. It is found in the corpus of meditation practices that he has introduced to the Order, for example in the Vajrasattva practice. It is also implicit in the role played by 'Just Sitting' in Bhante's system of meditation—an important point, to which I will return later.

Some mythic perils

Let me reiterate that the three myths are just that—myths. They are only an approach to the truth, not the truth itself. Every myth has a 'back' as well as a 'front'. It can close the gap between the Buddha and 'me'; but if taken too literally, or clung to as a substitute for experience, the myth may actually widen that gap. Until the gap between Buddhahood and 'me' is finally closed, one is always caught in misunderstandings, even if only very subtle ones. On this side of enlightenment, we have always got things at least slightly wrong. Consequently, every correction we make will eventually have to be corrected.

Let's briefly examine each myth in relation to its potential perils and pitfalls.

The myth of self-development is dangerous. If one judges oneself successful, it easily leads one into conceit — a muscular triumphalism that proclaims 'I did it my way'. On

the other hand, if we don't achieve the 'results' that we hoped for, the self-development myth may make us fall into despondency.

Actually, a painful sense of failure, provided it doesn't harden into despair, is the best medicine for over-reliance on the myth of self-development. In the biographies of some of the great Buddhist teachers, one reads of a moment of humiliation in which they are forced to accept that their belief in self-development has failed them.

We see this, for example, in the life of Honen (1133–1212CE), one of the great teachers of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan. An earnest and distinguished scholar in his early life, Honen is said to have read the entire Buddhist canon five times in his attempt to penetrate the truth, yet still felt as far away from it as ever. However, in his early forties he decided to abandon 'self-power' (i.e. what I am calling the path of self-development) and rely wholly on recitation of the name of Amitabha.

Honen is said to have recited the nembutsu sixty thousand times a day, and we might be inclined to regard this as a practice — a form of self-development, but from his standpoint within the myth of self-surrender, it was nothing of the sort. He did not regard the repetition of the name as a form of meditation; nor did it depend on study and deep understanding of its meaning. It was just a matter of joyful gratitude for Amitabha's establishment of a pure land in which those who recited his name with faith would be reborn. [18]

The example of Honen may help us to understand how self-development needs the corrective of self-surrender — the recognition that we must open ourselves up to something altogether beyond us. This makes perfect sense: how can we close the gap between the Buddha and 'me' by a strategy that focuses too intently on 'me' and 'my' strivings?

Likewise, our efforts towards self-development need to be balanced by an attitude of self-discovery — the realisation that the ultimate truth is present in this very moment, not in the future, and is also right here under our noses, not 'out there' or in some 'other world' that we must take by storm.

But these myths of self-surrender and self-discovery are also dangerous. Let's consider next the myth of self-surrender. This can easily lead to antinomianism — the view that moral rules don't really matter. For example, although Honen himself seems to have been austere in his personal life, some of his disciples were accused of moral laxity: they believed that Amitabha's vow had the power to redeem even the worst sinner, so it didn't matter too much how they behaved, as long as they recited the nembutsu with faith. [19]

The misbehaviour of Honen's disciples seems to have been largely a matter of eating meat and drinking alcohol, which might not seem too terrible, but self-surrender can lead to more serious moral failures. Some might say that the life of Nichiren is a case in point. Nichiren (1222-1282), another important figure in Japanese devotional Buddhism,

condemned all forms of Buddhism other than his own, and urged the state to suppress them forcibly. (Fortunately, he was ignored.) He is also said to have condoned the use of violence by his followers against other Buddhist sects. [20] Whatever one's overall assessment of his teaching may be (and without implying any judgement on those now practising in his tradition), it is hard to reconcile these particular views and actions with Buddhism.

Such stories make uncomfortable reading for western Buddhists: we know that in the theistic religions, people have sometimes done terrible things and said, 'God told me to do it', but we like to imagine that such things are impossible in Buddhism. But where too much emphasis is laid on the myth of self-surrender, Buddhists may act in much the same way.

The myth of self-surrender also lends itself to exploitation and abuse within the spiritual community, especially if one mistakes an ecclesiastical hierarchy for a spiritual hierarchy. If we feel too sure that we have to surrender to something, we may end up surrendering ourselves to charismatic but morally shallow leaders whom we naively believe to embody spiritual perfection.

So the myth of self-surrender needs to be balanced by the myth self-development: the recognition of the need for personal moral effort and the exercise of individual responsibility. But it also needs to be balanced by the myth of self-discovery, which emphasises that realization is found within our own experience, not outside it.

The myth of self-discovery, if followed too exclusively, is dangerous, too. Like the myth of self-surrender) it can lead to antinomianism — the idea that moral rules are superficial things that wise and noble spirits can feel free to disregard. For example, we now know that the Zen discourse of innate Buddhahood lent itself to the 'religious' justification of Japan's aggressive campaign of conquest in the second World War. [21]

In the context of Tibetan Buddhism, too, the great teacher Tsongkhapa (1357-1419 CE) found it necessary to sound a warning against the antinomian tendencies inherent in the higher Tantras. He saw that some people were abusing the idea of their inherent Buddhahood to do whatever they want. Tsongkhapa therefore emphasised a triyana approach. [22]

I find this interesting, because it seems to suggest a kind of progression in the three myths — that one needs to build secure foundations by means of self-development and self-surrender before focussing too closely on self-discovery (a point I shall return to).

The myth of self-discovery can also lead to moral and spiritual laziness. If effort can't add anything to your essential nature, why make an effort? 'I am already the Buddha, so I don't need to do anything in particular.'

Hand in hand with this laziness goes a tendency to mistake one's intellectual understanding for spiritual experience. I suspect that I myself have sometimes fallen

prey to this danger. If we can dazzle a few people with metaphysical expositions, we may come to think that we have realised the Truth. It seems to me that people who are attracted to the self-discovery myth are often of an intellectual bent.

Because of all these dangers, the myth of self-discovery needs the correctives of the myths of self-development — the exercise of moral effort through the use of will — and of self-surrender — the giving up of one's ego to something that lies beyond its bounds.

The three myths and culture

It will be obvious by now that I believe all three myths are necessary to a healthy spiritual life, and in order to make spiritual progress (if you'll pardon my partiality to the language of self-development!) one must somehow incorporate all three into one's approach.

Most of us will discover in ourselves a temperamental preference for one myth above the other two. As long as our preferred myth is working for us, that is fine, but it is useful to be aware of the factors that are conditioning our preference. Such awareness may help us to decide how far to go with our natural inclination, and how far to try to balance our preferred myth with one or both of the others.

One of the strongest factors influencing our preference is the culture that we inhabit. I have correlated the three myths with the three yanas, but I also think that each myth has affinities with particular historical phases of culture. One way of classifying these phases is as 'pre-modern' (or 'traditional'), 'modern', or 'postmodern'.

Surrender to a higher power is an attitude that seemed natural in the pre-modern or traditional world in which the individual was firmly located in hierarchical structures of family, clan or kingdom. In such a world, the emotions of loyalty, devotion and self-sacrifice seemed not only to be ordained by nature, but also blessed by supernatural forces.

The myth of self-development, in contrast, suited the modern world, which believed in an objective truth that could be known rationally, and sought progress.

But the modern world is, some say, now becoming the postmodern world. Postmodern culture is a vague and controversial concept, but it points to certain ways of thinking that do seem to be in the air nowadays. For example, there is, among many current thinkers, a mood of scepticism about objective truth and any grand, all-embracing kind of theory. Conversely, there is an inclination to embrace diversity and pluralism. If these ideas reflect the underlying mood in society, it seems likely that such a mood will incline Buddhists to think of Buddhahood as somehow located within themselves. Such an outlook will work against the myths of self-surrender, or self-development, and predispose us towards the myth of self-discovery.

Of course, long before 'postmodernity' came along, self-surrender had already been seriously undermined by modern society. The combined effects of empirical science (so overwhelmingly successful as a source of useful knowledge) and modern economic prosperity have tended to embed us more firmly in the material world, and make us doubt non-material realities. A good example of this is the question of where the Imaginal realm — the world of the gods and archetypal Buddhas and bodhisattvas — is located. We tend to think of it as lying within our own minds. It is not easy for us to have faith in the Transcendental as located objectively but invisibly 'out there' in the way that the myth of self-surrender requires to be fully effective.

Not only that, but the myth of self-surrender seems to us to be mixed up with social and religious subservience — which is antithetical to our democratic and egalitarian values. The pre-modern language of self-surrender is now unpalatable to many people the West.

But with the advent postmodern values, the myth of self-development is also beginning to look unfashionable. The trouble is that few people can become Buddhas, which seems unappealingly exclusive and elitist. In addition, if there is a long and arduous path of spiritual development, there must also be stages of that path, and consequently levels of attainment. If we accept that, we implicitly accept a hierarchy. But in a hierarchy, all the problems of authority — its use and misuse — inevitably arise. Understandably, perhaps, some aspects of the history of the modern era — fascism, for example — have made us suspicious of any discourse that promotes hierarchies or elites. I have heard certain Buddhists disparage the discourse of self-development as 'patriarchal', and even as 'fascist' and 'imperialist'.

I suspect that postmodern culture is pushing Buddhists towards the idea that Buddhahood is located 'within'. We may find ourselves thinking more and more in terms of self-discovery because that myth is most in tune with current values. But that means we are also likely to get ensnared in the 'back' of the self-discovery myth. It will constantly mislead us into thinking of the Buddha as being somehow 'me' or 'mine' already.

Buddhahood may in some sense be 'in here' but that does not mean it is something that is securely within our current knowledge and possession. Why should it be? Even in an everyday, psychological sense, most of us don't know very well who we are. For example, we often cannot see very clearly what we want or what we fear, even though those desires and fears are shaping our behaviour at every moment. Indeed, many of us have quite deluded ideas about what makes us tick. Our innate Buddhahood is likely to be even more deeply concealed from our conscious knowledge than our psychological quirks.

It is all right to think of Buddhahood — provisionally — as 'in here', but only if we also keep hold of some sense that, in the final analysis, it transcends 'out there' and 'in here'. (And in that sentence, not only the prepositional phrases 'out there' and 'in here', but

also the subject 'it' and even the verb 'transcends' should really be in inverted commas, because they too are only words, whose meaning is at best suggestive.)

If I am right in thinking that self-discovery is becoming the postmodern Buddhist myth of choice, then it seems likely that we will find ourselves more and more drawn to it. Indeed this seems to be happening already. I am not saying that we have to fight that tendency. It may be better to work with it, to some degree. But we would be wise to do so in a mindful and circumspect way.

By the way, what I have just been saying about the attraction of the myth of self-discovery to a postmodern culture may have some validity for the West (and even in the West, of course, the real picture is more complicated than I can indicate in this short discussion), but it doesn't apply at all yet in India, where a growing proportion of our Order and Movement is based. In India the myth of self-surrender is still more attractive to people than either of the other two.

Whether we are in the West or the East, we need to take our culture into account. We can perhaps make use of the positive momentum that our culture gives us towards a certain myth, but that doesn't mean that we have to go with the cultural flow unreservedly. Indeed, if our culture is pushing us in a particular direction, we need to be careful not to be swept along with it passively. We must beware of the 'back' of each myth.

Whatever our culture, as Buddhists we all start with the gap between the Buddhas and 'me'. Each of us needs to assess — and occasionally re-assess — the mode of our relationship to the Buddhas. Do we need to make more effort to become like them? Or do we need to allow them to take us over? Or do we need to find them in the depths of our own minds? Each of us needs to find a balance between effort, faith, and a sense of the truth as ever-present.

Development, Surrender, Discovery

To some extent, one's choice of myth is a matter not just of one's culture but also of one's personal temperament. It is also a question of the stage of the spiritual life — indeed of life itself — at which one finds oneself. At least, I am sure that is true for me personally. In my case, the experiences that drew me into Buddhism initially had the 'flavour' of self-discovery. But in actually trying to live the spiritual life, it was the myth of self-development that proved most useful to me at first. (How I needed it!) Self-surrender became vitally important later, when I was ordained. In taking up a visualisation practice at my ordination, I came into contact with something beyond myself.

Yet with the passing of time, the myth of self-discovery has once again become important to me. However, I think that the significance that it holds for me today is the outcome of my practice within the framework of the other two myths.

Thus, while all the myths have been relevant in some measure to each stage of my spiritual life, it seems that there has been a kind of shift of emphasis from development through surrender to discovery (without leaving the first two behind). While I can't assume that this pattern is universal, I suspect that it is quite common.

My personal experience therefore seems to bear out Bhante's general view of the myths, which, as we have seen, is that, at the outset of our spiritual lives, we benefit from thinking mainly in terms of the myth of self-development. At this stage, we may get confused and even go astray if we are influenced too much by the myth of self-discovery. The inexperienced are, as Bhante said,

...better off hearing that, by making sufficient effort, they can eventually attain a state called enlightenment. [23]

This raises the difficult question of how one can know when the time is ripe to adopt the self-discovery approach. I notice that, in those Buddhist traditions that focus on this myth, prominent practitioners seem to be concerned about precisely this issue — the question of when best to introduce their deepest teaching to their students. For example, I gather from Shenpen Hookham's book *The Buddha Within* that there is an ongoing debate in Mahamudra circles about this very question: should Mahamudra teachings be made available freely to everybody, or should they be kept back for those students whom the teacher deems ready for them? Some people advocate giving them out freely, on the grounds that they will benefit those who are ready, and harmlessly bounce off those who are not. But others argue that such teachings don't always bounce harmlessly off those who aren't ready for them: they may sometimes mislead them.

Sangharakshita clearly has been of the latter opinion. His main concern seems to be that people are liable to take up the self-discovery approach in a merely intellectual way, and mistake the idea for the experience. I suspect he is right, although I admit that I haven't had the opportunity for extensive observation of the impact that teaching focussed on self-discovery might have on beginners.

Yet despite Bhante's concerns about the dangers of the self-discovery myth, he has, as I have shown, included it to some degree in his teaching, presenting it in ways meant to reduce those dangers. He seems to have felt that his disciples would recognise for themselves when the time came for them to give the self-discovery myth a more central place in their understanding of what they were doing. The transition would come about naturally when their practice reached a stage that made that myth relevant. I think that there are elements, for example, in Bhante's system of meditation that allow for this transition to occur naturally and spontaneously.

Just Sitting

The system of meditation taught by Bhante is a structured corpus of practices. Although we can relate each of the practices in the system to any of the three myths, there is also

a sense in which each practice correlates more closely with one of the myths than with the other two.

To begin with, mental integration and positive emotion are cultivated in the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Metta Bhavana respectively — meditation practices that we teach to all beginners (although they are not to be regarded as only beginners' practices: they remain relevant at all levels of spiritual life). These practices clearly bear a close relation to the myth of self-development.

After this, according to Bhante's system, comes spiritual death (represented especially by the six-element practice) and spiritual rebirth (represented by the sadhana taken at ordination, which is often, though not invariably, the visualisation of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva). These practices make most sense when viewed in terms of the myth of self-surrender.

So where does the myth of self-discovery appear in the system? I think it appears, in an unassuming yet crucial way, in the practice of 'just sitting'. Perhaps the deeper significance of this practice hasn't been fully appreciated because Bhante's discourse about it has been so minimal, but I think that we are now ready to think and talk about the meaning of this aspect of his system more explicitly.

Bhante has taught us that, after doing a meditation practice — whether the Mindfulness of Breathing, the Metta Bhavana, the Six-Element Practice, a visualisation, or indeed any practice — we should just sit with its effects, allowing them to resonate within us spontaneously. He even indicated that it may be appropriate to do this not only at the end of a meditation practice, but even after each of the component stages of a practice, e.g. after each of the five phases of the Metta Bhavana.

I think this teaching, while perhaps appearing to be a minor or incidental part of the system, is actually very important — and highly significant as an expression of the myth of self-discovery within the system. While steering clear of problematic ideas about each of us being 'already the Buddha' — indeed, without any philosophy at all, rational or poetic — Bhante encourages us, at each level of his system, firstly to develop something through effort, and then to allow what we have developed to resonate spontaneously within us.

If we keep doing this, perhaps a stage will come (though Bhante saw no need to talk about this explicitly in presenting his 'system') when the state of mind that we have 'developed' reveals itself as something that was actually 'there all along'. Perhaps we will see that our 'development' of it was not, after all, the creation of something out of nothing, but the fanning into a fire of a glow that was always smouldering under the coals. The essence of 'just sitting' is that we lay aside the bellows and simply permit that fire to blaze with its own heat.

To do 'just sitting' at the level of spiritual death and rebirth is, in effect, to enter the territory of Mahamudra, of Dzogchen, of the Platform Sutra, and of the

Tathagatagarbha. Then — and only then — do those teachings become fully relevant as descriptions of our experience, rather than just ideas about it. At that point, we really are just allowing something that is actually present in our experience to unfold.

One consequence of Bhante's teaching of 'just sitting' is that we don't need to worry about the question of when to give emphasis to the myth of self-discovery. If we practice 'just sitting' in the way he recommended, we create a space in which a sense of self-discovery will emerge naturally when the time is ripe.

This suggests that it is with the arising of Perfect Vision (to use a term that most of us are long familiar with) that we truly start to live out the myth of self-discovery. Nevertheless, we can lay the foundations for the path of self-discovery much earlier by means of the practice (if one can call it a practice) of 'just sitting'. Meanwhile, until Perfect Vision arises, the myths of self-development and self-surrender remain vital to our spiritual health.

This view is amply borne out by the Buddhist tradition. For example, in his commentary on Vasubandhu's 'Thirty Verses', Hsuan Tsang says, in effect, that at the beginning of spiritual life — i.e. during the stages of morality and meditation ('meditation' here being samatha or the cultivation of tranquillity) — there is a need for will, even though will is actually illusory.

If we don't use will we won't move forward. We must therefore use something that we know (if only theoretically) to be illusory in order to reach the point at which we can see for ourselves that it really is illusory. [24]

I agree with Hsuan Tsang that we have to keep using our will in order to develop spiritually until we clearly recognise the decisive emergence of something that transcends our will. And I would add to Hsuan Tsang's advice a rider of my own, namely that we have to keep surrendering our ego to our spiritual ideal, in acts of faith and devotion, until we recognise that the ideal, though more vividly present than ever, is no longer 'out there' (nor yet 'in here'). Such experiences — moments in which we transcend mundane will and mundane faith — signal the real beginning of self-discovery.

But of course, even before that time comes, the myth of self-discovery may be an important source of inspiration for us, and we can even 'follow' it, in the sense of preparing the ground for it — by 'just sitting', for example.

Actually, the moment of the real emergence of the path of self-discovery is also the moment at which there ceases to be any question of which myth to follow. At this stage, one begins to transcend notions of developing, surrendering or discovering. One no longer relies on any particular 'reality view' because there has ceased to be an absolute dichotomy between the Buddha and 'me'.

We need to remember that even 'right views' are myths — relative and partial perspectives on life, each fraught with its own delusions and dangers. But at the same time, such views — including what I have called the three myths of the spiritual life — are very necessary for us at certain stages of that life. The three myths are, in the last analysis, methodological tools rather than philosophical positions. Indeed, all Buddhist doctrine is, as Sangharakshita once put it, 'doctrine for method's sake', and so is ultimately to be transcended.

I try to remember this truth in my own spiritual life. I know that I need to use the myths of self-development and self-surrender, balanced by the myth of self-discovery. I believe that by doing so I will eventually close the gap between the Buddha and me; or — if you prefer — will finally see that such a gap has never existed, save in my deluded mind.

More articles by Subhuti can be found at his personal website. See also the Windhorse Publications site for books by Subhuti.

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