

# Sādhana: the Context and Image of Buddhist Practice

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## Overview

The sādhana normally associated with ordination into the Triratna Buddhist Order makes a connection with the Buddha and his enlightenment, together with a method of realisation, that guides progress thereafter. Sadhana is often based on an imagined form of the Buddha but may take simpler forms, since its essential aspect is connecting to enlightenment.

## 1. Sādhana: Practice in the Round

Though the term 'sādhana' usually refers to the imagination of a particular Buddha-form in an instruction text, it can also be used in a broader sense to mean (our) entire practice in all its aspects centring on the Buddha. This idea of sādhana is very helpful. It provides a context that places all Dharma practice in relation to the enlightened Buddha, source of the teaching.

Sādhana according to this viewpoint is the complete body of all the Dharma practices one does. This we usually explain in terms of a dharma system of five key principles (see drawing) that in the sequence of one's personal practice might comprise for example: mindfulness of breathing, mettā bhāvanā, the six-element practice, walking meditation, study, mindfulness, ethical practice and just sitting. All these may be conceived as a mandala with the Buddha in the centre, each aspect of the mandala contributing in some way to the whole—and also developing and maintaining the 'image' of the Buddha at the centre, since in whatever dharma practice one is doing, there is an implicit reference to the Buddha's enlightenment experience. One reflects: the Buddha himself taught in a similar way to this; the Buddha himself practised like this; this contributed to the Buddha's own awakening. All this brings alive an inner image or idea of the Buddha.

This developing image naturally comes into play when visualising the Buddha and reciting a mantra. In sadhana there develops a special dynamic between an image one always has of Buddhahood (a kind of concept known traditionally as the samayasattva) versus the jñanasattva—how Buddhahood is in reality—which over time seeds its realisation within the practitioner.

The image also affects how one sees and understands the other practices, which become ways to draw out the Buddha's qualities. Metta bhavana for example and the other Brahmavihara meditations are seen more in terms of cultivating the Buddha's compassion. His wisdom is seen to arise through Dharma study and insight practice, his skilful means through practice of the precepts. Once this dynamic is active, all dharma practice affects the Buddha image, and meditation on the Buddha image affects the other practices.

## 2. Stages of Sādhana practice

Sādhana practice generally consists of several stages culminating in a request for teaching, in a very similar way to a pūja. Indeed pūja is very easily performed as a sādhana. Once understood, these stages may be adapted — elaborated, shortened, combined in whatever way helps one's current practice. However before allowing oneself that freedom it is helpful to

learn how they work in sequence: understanding the inner dynamic helps to direct the imagination and connect with the Buddha.

First, cultivate basic śamatha through mettā bhāvanā, mindfulness of breathing, etc. It is enough simply to calm down the inner body, but you may feel like spending more time cultivating dhyana or brahmavihara.

Next recollect the purpose of the practice and generate inspiration. This may be done in many ways, such as by chanting the verses of the Ti Ratana Vandana or by doing pūjā, ritual celebration of the spiritual life.\_

Another approach would be to generate inspiration by imagining (as for example in the Kalyānamitra Yoga) the lineage of enlightened teachers and their influence coming down to your own teacher and preceptors, from whom you receive blessings and encouragement. This stage of a sādhana meditation may include generating mettā or bodhicitta, recollecting the impermanence or insubstantiality of things or reflecting on the six elements. The above (and many other practices) are all possible preliminaries for what follows, done either as part of the same session or beforehand.

The main practice then begins with reflection on the insubstantial and conditioned nature of all appearances and with imagination of the 'blue sky.' This is an idea, a metaphor or an image for śūnyatā, which is the open dimension beyond subjective construction, words and concepts, which is the way all things actually are. From a vipasyana point of view this is the most essential part of the sadhana, so when in this stage one should allow sufficient time to feel that this is true — so there is some sense of having stepped into that dimension. In each moment of experience as it unfolds and collapses, see its changing nature, its lack of lasting substance, its imperfection - and recall that all experience has these qualities. Relax, let go and enjoy this timeless, unexplained space without philosophising.

Then, out of this sense of pure openness (which need not be imagined but simply felt or intuited), allow the Buddha, glorious in colour and form, or in some non visual manner, to appear. The text may suggest that he/she appears as though 'made of light', which is another metaphor indicating that the image may manifest in non-visual ways, depending on how the imagination works. The text will also prescribe particular colours and forms as a general indication of the Buddha's qualities, but this description is merely a 'template' for making a start. Depending on your personal nature it could be preferable to imagine the Buddha literally as prescribed, or to ignore most of the detail - so use the template as good sense (and perhaps your preceptor) suggests. What is of primary importance is seeking out a sense of an actual connection with the Buddha. The sense of seeking is enhanced by the conviction that one is connecting with a deeper reality arising out of the sky-like seeing of insubstantiality. It can be as though one is actually meeting the Buddha and being witnessed by him as a practitioner of his teaching.

From this connection comes a sense of an open communication. The feeling is enhanced and sustained by repeating the mantra associated with the Buddha. (The mantra itself should be considered as an image of the Buddha in sound form - and it could be the primary image through which you make contact with the Buddha.) Imagine the Buddha witnessing your sincere desire to practise and bestowing blessings in the form of coloured light rays entering your heart from his. This central moment of the drama of sadhana is known as the transmission of adhiṣṭhāna (blessing), styled also in the old Indo-Tibetan tradition 'empowerment', for the gift of confidence it gives in bestowing the living influence of the Buddha, our great spiritual ancestor. The ancestral metaphor aids reflection on the nature of this influence. It also says something about its living quality - for the quality of adhiṣṭhāna is 'live' as is an electric wire or a family trait. We have all been subject since birth to countless

influences. Some have marked us more than others. The main ones have come from people (parents, teachers and friends) but everyone is also influenced by their culture (by, say, music, media, and language) as well as ideas taken in through education and reading. You wandered into all these seemingly by accident. As a Dharma practitioner, you have somehow also come under the Buddha's influence, which by now may well have become your guiding star. So this is what adhiṣṭhāna represents: an intense transmission of the Dharma culture that originated from the Buddha's realization and has since been kept alive in the practice, personal development and dialogue of countless teachers and their disciples right down to your time. It is now being bestowed upon you, personally, as a transmission direct from the heart of the Buddha.

Once the stream of adhiṣṭhāna has been fully received from the Buddha, the sādhana comes slowly to an end. As the text usually indicates, the image may be dissolved back into the śūnyatā it emerged from or straight into your heart. Its dissolution may also be accompanied by reflection on the inseparability of form and emptiness. The 'sky' is then finally dissolved. You then:

Dedicate the goodness of your intentions in doing the practice for the welfare of all beings. This may be a spontaneous prayer, some phrases recommended in the sadhana text, or a known dedicatory verse.

### **3. Visualisation, insight, and the life of awakening**

How in more detail can the practice of (visualisation) sādhana work as a form of vipaśyana or insight meditation, and be applied within everyday life?

Though the Buddhānusati practice apparently stems from the earliest period (as attested by Pīngiya's visualisation in the final verses of the Sutta Nipāta), the Buddha taught reflection and direct seeing of the three lakṣhanas as the main contemplative method. It was in later Buddhist tradition that sādhana developed as we practice today, using visualisations of different forms of the Buddha. This approach is based on vipaśyana but works more with the post-vipaśyana vision of 'spiritual rebirth', and reflects the view of the final phase of developed Indian Buddhism known as Yogacāra or Yogacāra Madhyamaka.

The Ch'an teacher Huangbo Xiyun (d.850) said this.

All the Buddhas and all sentient beings are nothing but (the mind), beside which nothing exists.

This mind, which is without beginning, is unborn and indestructible.

It is not green nor yellow, and has neither form nor appearance.

It does not belong to the categories of things which exist or do not exist, nor can it be thought of in terms of new or old.

It is neither long nor short, big nor small, for it transcends all limits, measures, names, traces, and comparisons.

It is that which you see before you.

'It is that which you see before you.' This is the key to the view of sadhana as an insight (vipaśyana) meditation. In comparison with the simpler reflections on, or direct seeing of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality, we are looking at the result rather than the cause of insight. The cause might be reflection on anatta; the result, seeing the mind in a similar way to Huangbo Xiyun above.

From the way the main visualisation practice opens—with *śūnyatā* —it is clear that the intended perspective is one of spiritual death and rebirth. The 'image' of the Buddha that emerges from *śūnyatā* symbolizes the beauty and potential in the insubstantial nature of all experience. Experience never actually consists of things, though an infinity of things appears: each is a momentary appearance that has been conditioned by other appearances and is thus empty, in its own very particular way, of any permanent substance. This multitude of particularities is beautiful, though we are not normally able to see impermanence as beautiful. The blue sky of imagining this vast, universal 'emptiness' also represents the source of its vision, the 'spiritual death' of ordinary seeing, the collapse of what normally appears as a solid and substantial 'me' surrounded by 'my' solid and substantial world. As a none-too-solid wall actually becomes a helpful condition when you decide to demolish a dangerous old building, insight into insubstantiality is a powerful condition for 'spiritual rebirth,' the resolution of the conflict that culminates in spiritual death, to manifest. Thus in the succeeding stage of the practice, the form of Śākyamuni Buddha (or a Bodhisattva such as Tārā or Mañjuśrī) is imagined as an expression of the wisdom and compassion that can flow when the delusion of substantiality collapses.

### **Sādhana, imagination and insight**

The main key to *sādhana* is the reflection on image and reality, *rūpa* (form) and *śūnyatā* which goes with the blue sky. This is made more explicit in longer *sādhana* texts like the *Mahakarunika* which contain special verses evoking the nature of *śūnyatā*, but the reflection is essential to the meaning in any *sādhana*.

These meditations explore on the one hand the beauty of ideal human being and on the other the true nature of any image, that it is impermanent and without substantial existence; and that the manner of its existence is deeply mysterious and cannot be described or understood with the ordinary mind. Only the experience of spiritual death, when the self view is seen through at least momentarily, makes possible that understanding.

In imagining the boundless space of the 'blue sky', one implicitly meditates on the fact that the Buddha image and its *śūnya* nature are inseparable, not different things. The image was never a substantial thing, its nature being *śūnya*, and nor was *śūnyatā* ever a thing but rather the insubstantial nature of all things. The Buddha-form is 'empty', and its 'emptiness' is no different from its form.

As the image of the Buddha manifests out of the insubstantial nature of all things, take that as the ideal object for reflection on *rūpa* and *śūnyatā*. Formally, do this reflection on the nature of form and the nature of *śūnyatā* both at the beginning and at the end of the main *sādhana* stage. The point when the Buddha is imagined appearing out of the blue sky is a special opportunity to reflect on how form arises out of emptiness; the point where the Buddha dissolves back into the blue sky is a special opportunity to reflect on how emptiness is not different from form.

Often the *śūnyatā* mantra is recited at that initial transition point: OM SVABHĀVASUDDHĀḤ SARVADHARMAḤSVABHĀVASUDDHO 'HAM. Mantras do not usually translate well but this one has a clear meaning:

‘Om (the syllable that calls up the infinite, the universal, or the totality of reality) all dharmas are pure in their nature and in the same way I too am pure’. In other words all dharmas (i.e. things), including those dharmas I refer to as ‘me’, are pure because they are all *sūnyatā*, all perfectly empty of substance - yet all at the same time vividly real as forms.

As you are aware, you have created the Buddha's image yourself from your relatively impoverished imagination. However as will be seen, its very imperfection and subjectivity contributes to the realisation of the *sādhana*. Certainly one's ability to find and focus on this image is imperfect, and quite possibly sometimes one hardly perceives anything at all during the *sādhana*. Yet you are imagining something when you sincerely make the attempt, and that something, whatever it is and however imperfect it may be, is the precious image that connects you to the Buddha. This is the essential thing. It somehow emerges from *sūnyatā*, and it stands in your mind for the Buddha: these facts are all that matters. Remember that when you visualize the Buddha as an image of form, colour and light, it is necessarily a crude approximation of how you would experience the Buddha if he were actually present. It is necessarily thus even when imagining an ordinary person. Each person we know has a distinct and recognizable atmosphere with certain characteristics that can be recognized but not adequately described. Visualizing or imagining involves working not only with shapes in imaginal space but also with indescribable images in the mind, impressions and vibrations that don't translate into the usual visual terms.

It is interesting to reflect on the nature of form. What is it? You can say that there are visual forms you see, audible forms you hear and tangible forms you touch. Ideas and feelings also have a form, though not a visual one - there is some kind of mental image. These forms and images, which engage your attention all the time, are in some way beyond verbal description. For example, one can say that a perfume has a form, since I can very clearly imagine the perfume of a rose. I can also very easily imagine the smell of frying onions, yet I can't describe the images of these odours. Or I may be able to find words that evoke those sensations but the words will never be the same as the experience itself and cannot encompass it fully.

It is similar with the image of the Buddha: you can only make rough attempts to paint a mental picture of the Buddha's form. That is not so much because your imagination is limited as because you're not awakened, so your imagination doesn't have much to go on when trying to imagine an awakened being. Nonetheless, dwelling on the Buddha and his Awakening can place the mind in a much bigger space, that of the awakened mind, and it offers the imaginative possibility of opening up to it.

Imagination uses stored memories of previous sense impressions – memories of all the sights you've seen, the sounds you've heard and the ideas you've had – as a kind of clip art, ready-made images for the imaginative process. You can see these images playing freely in your dreams and daydreams, but they also come sharply into focus when you think and imagine. The key to *sādhana* is to realize that your imagination is at play everywhere and all the time. Imagination does not take place on an exalted plane; it is a faculty that everyone uses in every moment. It is continually at work in all the various worlds you inhabit, not only in waking life but also in dreams, in meditation and in distractions from it – and also in the transitional states after death, according to the Bardo Thödöl teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. Awareness always changes, but like matter and energy, it never stops forever.

Doing sādhana helps to show you the extent to which everyone's world consists of self-created images. This deepens your realization of the Buddha's teachings of conditionality and insubstantiality and opens your heart to the transforming influence of the Dharma. By working with the imaginal faculty of the mind, sādhana even introduces a new level of mindfulness practice, in which you consciously explore how you create your own world.

While awake, you see, you hear, you smell, you taste, you touch and you perceive mental objects – you experience the six sense consciousnesses. The six sense consciousnesses are what constitute waking life. However, sense consciousness is not unique to waking life, for in dreams you also see, hear, touch, remember and sometimes plan in detail, driven by strong feelings and emotions. In fact, when you see the richness of your consciousness in dreams, it is disconcertingly difficult to pin down what is special about the waking state. You naturally view waking life as the most real and significant part of your existence; yet while it happens, a dream is as real to you as waking life. Thus your world, waking or sleeping, is always an interpretation of data previously received through your senses. You might object that experiences in the dream state are not real sense impressions but memories of sense experiences, somehow mediated by the mind sense. This is true, but sense experience is also mediated by the mind sense in waking life. The retina and tympanic membranes don't see or hear – the raw data is processed by the brain and the various mental faculties in ways that make it meaningful. So though waking and dreaming are very different, one can learn a good deal from being mindful of both experiences.

At all times, even when not meditating, sense experience is, in itself, pure and undistorted, but one covers over the stream of fresh information with habitual expectations. The purity of each moment of experience is revealed through this deeper application of mindfulness enabled by sādhana meditation. You start to notice how you continually create a fairly fixed version of the world. Mindfulness shows how that is a story one tells oneself using sense memories; and in discovering oneself doing that, the faculty of imagination used in sādhana is unveiled.

Actually, in normal life, you are imagining everything – from what you might have for dinner, to what it might be like to meet someone, to how that person themselves might feel. You imagine your spiritual teacher, imagine the Buddha, imagine other people generally. And you certainly don't do this only when planning to meet, or meditating on mettā bhāvanā; you continue to imagine them when actually meeting them face to face. It takes an extra act of imagination really to see who someone else is and empathize with them. For we even imagine ourselves – indeed, we do that more than anything else.

This endless imaginative play is the way the mind works. To see it happening allows you to free up its remarkable energies and enables a far more effective imagination of the state of Enlightenment and its embodiment in Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and enlightened teachers. It brings you closer to them and to your potential to be like them. Imagining a Buddha, however, is more demanding than imagining an ordinary person. Being enlightened, the Buddha lies outside the normal range of experience. Sādhana practice establishes a bridge by creating an image rich enough to carry the power of your inspiration and eventually to 'possess' you with the essence of Awakening.

In using the traditional iconographies (such as a tawny light, a sword and a book of wisdom for Mañjuṣa, white snowy radiance for Vajrasattva and red sunset glory for Amitābha), the

sādhana texts help you to make a relatively crude connection with the actual Buddha that is potential in you. The potential is in the expanded, self-transcended, insightful mind that is so much beyond you that it makes just as much sense to speak of the Buddha as existing outside you, which is how you usually envisage the Buddha in these visualizations. You do all you can to imagine the Buddha externally, but what eventually happens transcends your concepts of internal and external. The sincerity of your attempt to make this bridge allows the awakened consciousness to come and 'inhabit' the experience of sādhana you're creating.

This process, through which the real Buddha inhabits your constructed, inaccurate image, is traditionally conceived as follows. The image you create is known as the samayasattva; the actual awakened consciousness is the jñānasattva. Jñāna means the wisdom of Awakening and sattva means 'being'. Samaya refers to the two way bond or commitment that (1) you have made at ordination to become awakened through practising sādhana and (2) the Buddha has made through his vow to liberate all beings including you. Your evoking the Buddha through ritually worshipping him or her, recollecting śūnyatā, creating an image and imagining yourself connecting with it is, so far, all activity taking place in your subjective imagination; but in so doing you are also creating conditions for something you cannot imagine to come from that part of the mind that is beyond 'you'. Until that extraordinary bridge becomes actual you can only pray, have confidence and make yourself receptive. However the samaya will eventually work out: so long as you fulfil your side of the commitment, there will definitely be a response from the Buddha's 'side'.

The notion of the Buddha's influence reaching out to you in the stage of spiritual rebirth may sound pretty much like God, which Buddhism is supposed to reject. Buddhism certainly finds the idea of an omnipotent creator deity incoherent, and the notion is satirized by the Buddha in the Pali canon. But since practitioners who believe in God have spiritual experiences similar to those we are discussing, it is only natural they should attribute them to the deity they believe in. Buddhism would deny that attribution - but not their experience. All spiritual traditions must use language in their attempts to point towards what ultimately cannot be expressed in words but can be experienced in practice. The Buddha believed that his radical way of putting things – especially in terms of universal conditionality and insubstantiality – was a more helpful guide to practice than substantialist, theistic language.

#### **4. Buddhānusati and the Image of the Buddha**

Connection to the Buddha and his way of practice

All Buddhist traditions connect somehow with the Buddha and strive to make that connection real by practising to realize what the Buddha realized. Sādhana creates a mirror for one's deepening 'going for refuge to the Buddha', one's having made a strong commitment to practise his teaching in this life as a means of gaining Enlightenment for the sake of all beings. Like a mirror, regular practice measures and reflects the state of our going for refuge. It is also a way of making contact with the Buddha in a very personal way, by deepening appreciation of him through contemplating the internal image one retains as a seed in the mind. For many practitioners, this act of opening to the Buddha's influence may become central to all other Buddhist practices. Even though a sādhana practice often takes the form of a written text, the form of that text is always secondary to its enabling the practitioner to make personal contact with the Buddha's presence through this seed-image.

The sādhanā texts used by the Triratna Buddhist community originated within the ancient Indo-Tibetan Buddhist culture of the various masters who initiated our founder Sangharakshita. Towards the end of his twenty-year stay in India, they encouraged him to practise the sādhanas they had given him, and also to pass them on.

The essential form of sādhanā meditation

The most essential form of sādhanā practice is simply to sit in meditation, with a good foundation of concentration, mindfulness and trust. You then connect with an image of the Buddha, however you find yourself perceiving it, and open yourself to the adhiṣṭhāna or blessing. In our tradition this approach has sometimes been called Buddhānusati, in reference to the ancient practice of recollecting the Enlightened One using the first section of the Ti Ratana Vandana chant. (Buddhānusati is said by Buddhaghoṣa to have been one of the forty kammathāna recommended by the Buddha).

Be open to the image appearing in unexpected ways, as variously discussed above. The way in which adhiṣṭhāna is experienced, too, may well be other than what might conventionally be expected (perhaps as words or images) though it may also be exactly that. As with the seed-image, something will certainly show itself, and that will be the form the adhiṣṭhāna takes. You need to learn to recognise it.

Provided you sit having established śamatha and right view, i.e. awareness of śūnyatā and conditionality (pratīyasamutpāda), both seed-image and adhiṣṭhāna will appear somewhere, somehow. There will be some kind of experience of increased clarity or inspiration when you open yourself to the possibility of the Buddha's influence. The experience may be subtle, you'll need to learn how to read it, and the conditions you bring to the practice will of course also influence the experience. But if you give enough time and trust to absorbing the 'message' of the practice, its seed will grow and in time become of immeasurable spiritual value.

This simple, intuitive form of practice is the essence of all sādhanā meditation - the more developed, text based practices do not go further than this: 'No higher teachings, only deeper understandings.'