

Elements of Sadhana
Introduction to New Zealand Order Retreat
April 2021

I thought I'd say a bit about the aim of our retreat. Well, we are going to deepen our dharma practice together. Simple as that. Yet profound, potentially!

What about the teachings? Well, I've done a long series of Order retreats over the last year, but they have all had a particular theme, usually a particular sadhana. Ours is simply an Order retreat and so I thought our theme should be Order Practice. And with an emphasis on sadhana practice, hence the main title, Living in the Vajra World.

I'm aware that sadhana doesn't really feature in many Order members' practice these days, I think the majority. And I've had phases myself in which I haven't found sadhana that helpful or inspiring. So one thing I've been doing in my teaching over this year is taking a fresh look at the traditional supports for sadhana practice, and also having a fresh look at what we are actually trying to do in sadhana.

There are a number of supporting practices that we already do, but we maybe don't even know it. You might not recognise for example the vajra body, the inner sense of an energy body. But we'll recognise it from its expression in the symbolic language of seed syllables, OM AH HUM that are visualised. In sadhana there is an emphasis on the energy in the body, and flows of energy light within the body. These are partly symbolic and partly felt energies.

This aspect of the practice is partly simply mindfulness of the body - of the body energies. But it is also something elemental, to do with the primary forces of our embodiment — in water, earth, fire, wind, space and awareness. This viewpoint expresses our existential and even our primordial nature, outside the construction of time and space, life and death.

So this vajra body is incredibly rich as a practice in itself, and we can do a whole retreat on it without even mentioning sadhana. But it is a perspective that is essential to sadhana meditation, since the figures whose existence we imagine as a method of opening up to ultimate reality, these figures also are imagined in that light, with seed syllables expressing that elemental quality. In other words they are part of that

same world of the vajra body, part of the same mystery. In sadhana we have subject and object, the one who perceives the figure in the sadhana, and the figure themselves. And both are deconstructed into light forms and seen in terms of energy.

2. Another area that relates to sadhana, that is fundamental to it, and which again we could spend our whole retreat time on, without even mentioning the word sadhana, is the more well known kind of deconstruction of both the subject and the object of the practice. This is sunyata, the emptiness of all constructions.

Time for example is an abstract idea that we impose onto experience. So are many things in this fleeting world. We tend to get a bit stuck in a world of such labels, of names, nimitta, that stand for various experiences but are not, in themselves, those experiences. So even before we get to the point where we imagine Tara or Vajrapani or Sakyamuni there's lots we can do to explore the territory of undoing constructed, fixed ideas of reality and stepping into something more natural and free. Many Order members do insight inquiry, six elements practice, etc. as a separate exploration.

Sadhana practice, supposedly, incorporates all of this in one practice. it's a practice that incorporates every element of Sangharakshita's System of Meditation, and even — if you think of sadhana as a whole life practice, which is the intention — what we call the system of dharma life. So this is what I want to explore over our week together. I want to do some exploration of the different components of sadhana as well as getting into several sadhana practices that I know well.

When we do get to that point of imagining the Buddha figure, those other trainings function as a support.

First we are aware to some extent of the emptiness of existence, that the nature of existence is not as we usually assume, that it is more like a dream, a ball of foam or a mirage. We're not expected to have a complete realisation of sunyata, we just need to be open to that.

Then second, we also have a sense of that emptiness as it applies in our own experience of the body — it is something mysterious, it is elemental mahabhuta energy, not something we can say we own. This makes the inner body a kind of portal into emptiness and also a link to the more general opening up to emptiness in the symbolic blue sky. And then when the visualisation starts there is a third factor, which is the emptiness of the visualised image.

Emptiness Emptiness Emptiness.

Emptiness, is not a kind of substance that everything secretly consists of. Emptiness is the fact that everything is uniquely empty of all the constructions, assumptions and names that get put upon that thing. The typecasting, the derogatory views, the placing on pedestals. Things are just what they are. Like when you try and draw something you realise you never really look at things. In other words, the emptiness of each thing of its constructed aspect is unique.

So when you look at the emptiness of the Buddha image in the sadhana, you have a chance to drop your ideas about them and try to penetrate the truth about them, what they really are.

When these practices started to emerge with the Vajrayana, they were an application of the realisation of the mirror like wisdom. That wisdom is essentially the fact that the subject and the object are inseparable. The way the world appears to us is a straight reflection of how we are. The image of the Buddha that we see is bound to be our own perception, bound to be mixed up with our subjectivity. I think this is why so often after the early idealistic years, so many OMs get to feel unenthusiastic about visualisation practice. It is boring. Nothing happens. There is nothing there. Well, there is something, but it is just their own mind. Just their own boring mind. And obviously, it can't be that, they think.

I'm afraid it is exactly that. But perhaps the mind isn't intrinsically boring.

Anyway, there's another strand comes in here, as well as the mirror like wisdom and all the other aspects of emptiness. Because all this comes into relationship with a sense of awakening being innate; that there is something already in us, in seed form, that will emerge through our practice of the dharma. That awakening is a real potential for all of us.

In all of the sadhanas we do there is some element that gives that signal. In many of them one literally imagines oneself as the awakened figure. In others, there is some sense of merging with the figure usually at the conclusion of the sadhana, so that whatever they are is now experienced as part of us, perhaps as a seed. The seed syllables themselves give that message.

Seeds are key images in this imaginal world. The image of a seed is also from the Yogacara tradition of this body-mind being a storehouse of all the impressions and actions that have ever happened in this entire continuum of experience, that is our embodiment in life after life. It is an

incredible image that's worth reflecting on.

A seed is an energy potential that lies dormant until the conditions are there for its potential to emerge. Put it in soil and water it, and its extraordinary what unfolds. Who would have thought something so amazing could come from something so shrivelled looking and brown? And it's the same with us. Touch some of the seeds in our alayavijna storehouse, and you wouldn't believe the petulance, the reactivity, the defensiveness springing from that one little thing.

But touch some other seeds and who would have known there was such nobility, such beauty? My dear friends, we all have the seed potentials for awakening and all the actions of an enlightened being.

That is sometimes called the all accomplishing wisdom, the final unfoldment of the five wisdoms. So also the all distinguishing wisdom, the wisdom of equal samsara and nirvana, the wisdom of the subject and the object being one as reflected in a mirror, and the central wisdom of emptiness in general, which makes all this possible. These five wisdoms and compassionate actions lie within us all in seed form, but they do need watering, they absolutely need the right conditions for them to emerge.

We're going to do some of that watering on our retreat from tomorrow.

But let me finish off what I have been saying about these different elements that come together in sadhana practice. When we come to imagine Manjusri or Tara, these supporting practices put us in a much better position to imagine what they really are, and put us in a much better position to receive the blessings that come from them. For we are really calling on energetic forces that are beyond what anyone can imagine. People may believe that they can imagine enlightenment, but can they really?

This question really encapsulates what sadhana is about. The mind of the practitioner is really opened up by all these different kinds of vipasyana reflection — and *then* you imagine being with Manjusri. In those circumstances it really feels very different.

Obviously imagining being with Manjusri is just imagining it. It is a kind of play acting, it is theatre. However we tend to stress that little word 'just'— we think it's just imagination. We think that means it isn't real.

Two things here.

First as the ancient Greeks and many cultures have known in the past, theatre can be profoundly moving. As with Greek tragedy. It is like ritual, witnessing certain things can induce deep change and awaken understandings of reality that simply weren't there before.

The other thing is that yes, this is the imagination but imagination is what the mind does, it is the actual nature of the mind. The mind is not just the ability to imagine, it *consists* of images, it is all images. And it is thought to continue beyond this life into other kinds of imaginal experience. The imagination is not so much something we do, it is much more something that does us. We might think the imagination is like our tool we use for our purposes but really we, the subject who assumes they are in control, are contained within something that is alive from its own side, and which contains both subject and object.

So - when we sit with Manjusri, and receive his blessing and later become Manjusri jnanasattva, we are entering into a sacred kind of theatre, a ritual theatre that can move our whole being in ways that could not be anticipated or worked out in advance.

There is even more that can be said about this kind of practice, but I think that will do for tonight, because I just wanted to give an idea of the framework I have in mind for the retreat. This week I would like to explore these different avenues that lead to fully engaging with the sacred theatre of sadhana - the vajra body, the emptiness of subject and object, the innate fivefold wisdom, and the nature of the mind.

And a lot of that exploration can be very simple. Just mindfulness of breathing, when we see its role in awakening the vajra body, becomes a profound practice. Same with metta, karuna and the other brahmanviharas, same with the six elements practice and also the vipasyna inquiry quite a few of us were doing in the later stages of the anapanasati practice a week or so ago, when we were fund raising to enable people to use Sudarshanaloka during the winter.

By the way, I suppose this is a digression but I hope you will donate to that very noble cause. People really need to get on retreat in good conditions. I see they only got a third of what they wanted. Can't they get the whole thng?

Anyway on the topic of good conditions, we are going to get those this week—but you have to use this space properly. What is great about online retreats is that you can practice at home, just as you are, surrounded by all the things that being on retreat is designed to get you away from. That sounds like a negative thing, but it isn't because the practice you do at

home, day after day, has arguably a bigger impact on your life overall than the high intensity spike of practice that happens once every year or so when you go on retreat. That's inspiring, but you always have to return home and get on with practice.

So what we have here is a great chance to change our *home* practice. You will get some of that high intensity spike but you can also set up routines that will continue after the retreat if you are realistic about it.

So please attend all the actual meditations you can. It's fine to listen to the teaching material at any time, it will all be available indefinitely, but the magic comes only when you practice over a long time, so please get as stuck into practice as much as you can, even if you can't get to the sessions on the programme. The dharma really works.

Please also consider the retreat as a community practice. If we look into each of these little boxes we see individuals in their personal space. I think it is rather amazing that we can see each other in our own environment, we see much more of the person, and it makes a difference to the sense of community if you are all happy to be seen. Sometimes it makes a lot of sense to have your camera off, I understand that, but most of the time, please trust us with your humble home. I am. Here I am sitting in front of my yucca plant and a shrine and you'll probably get to see some of the rest of where I live, now in rural Suffolk. I was in London until just a few months ago. We - myself and Yashobodhi - have just been through our first winter, which needed three tons of coal and a couple of loads of wood as well. We were really firing up the dharma here in the UK. It's a lot colder outside the city.. but mostly it's wonderful, and I'm looking forward to the summer which is starting soon.

It is great to be on our retreat and I really look forward to starting the meditations in the morning.

Tonight all that remains is to dedicate the space of our retreat, which includes all our zoom spaces that we can see into on the screen, and then I hope you will get a good night's sleep in time for our double meditation in the morning.