



The influence of the Buddha

*Iti pi so bhagava araham samma-sambuddho
vijjā-carana sampanno sugato
loka-vidl, anuttaro purisa-damma-sārati
sattha deva-manussānam buddho bhagavā-ti.*

Such indeed is He, the richly endowed: the free, the fully and perfectly awake
Equipped with knowledge and practice, the happily attained,
Knower of the worlds - guide unsurpassed of men to be tamed,
The Teacher of gods and men, The Awakened One richly endowed.

The Buddha's qualities praised in the Buddha Vandāna

Buddhist meditation practice has always looked to the Buddha and his teachings as a touchstone. The historical Buddha Gautama, also known as Sākyamuni, is the originator of all Buddhist teachings. He is the key reference point: through the ancient record of the Buddha's teaching, we know about Enlightenment. If we touch that ancestral stone and feel a relationship with it, we can feel as though we are learning from the Buddha. After the point of insight, experience aligns with Sakyamuni's original awakening, and the image of Buddha becomes an inner teacher.

According to Buddhaghosa, the Buddha over his lifetime presented forty methods of meditation, known as the Kammatthānas or 'work-places':

The Ten Kasinas: varieties of the kasina practice using concentration upon discs of various colours: earth kasina, water kasina, air or wind kasina, fire kasina, blue kasina, green kasina, yellow kasina, red kasina, white kasina, limited space kasina and light kasina.

The Ten Asubhas, the 'impure' or unbeautiful meditations: contemplations of a swollen corpse, a discoloured corpse, a festering corpse, a fissured corpse, a mangled corpse, a dismembered corpse,

a cut and dismembered corpse, a bleeding corpse, a worm-infested corpse and a skeleton.

The Ten Anussatis or Recollections: the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, ethics, generosity, the gods, death, the body (mindfulness of the body), breathing (mindfulness of breathing) and Enlightenment.

The four Brahma Vihāras: Mettā Bhāvanā, Karuṇā Bhāvanā, Muditā Bhāvanā and Upekkhā Bhāvanā.

The Four Formless Spheres, i.e. the arūpadhyānas: the sphere of space, the sphere of consciousness, the sphere of no-thingness and the sphere of neither perception nor non-perception.

The Perception of Loathsomeness in Food, an antidote to craving, and

The Analysis of the Four Elements, which is similar to the six element practice.

The first of the ten recollections is Buddhānusati, recollection of the Buddha. The traditional form of Buddhānusati involves calling the buddha's qualities to mind using the Buddha Vandāna verses quoted at the beginning. These recollect his intelligence, wisdom and compassion, his freedom and full wakefulness of mind, his amazing stock of knowledge and experience, his familiarity with all realms of experience and his unsurpassed ability as a teacher not only of human beings but also of gods.

To think strongly about any quality, good or bad, is to evoke it in the mind. To dwell for a long time on someone's kindness or their nastiness will correspondingly soften or harden our attitude. So at least to some degree, recollecting the Buddha's qualities can gradually bring them about in us. This principle is employed in an important range of meditation practices called sādhana that give a framework of images and traditional verses. Practising these along with reading about his life and studying his teachings, the meditator naturally forms a deep impression. This acts like a 'Dharma seed' of insight which eventually takes on a life of its own.

Early sādhana

The process of recollection probably explains how visualization practices developed in the later, Mahayāna Buddhist tradition, but the trend began much earlier with Buddhānusati meditation. And in the account of his final days, the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, the Buddha recommends that his disciples set up Stūpas as a reminder of him. Stupa worship, then, could also be regarded as a kind of Buddhanusati.

The earliest account of something akin to Buddhanusati is found in the final verses of the Sutta Nipāta. An elderly disciple, Pingiya, is too sick and frail to travel to meet the Buddha, but he practises imagining him vividly:

With constant and careful vigilance it is possible for me to see him with my mind as clearly as with my eyes, in night as well as day ... there is not, to my mind, a single moment spent away from him. I cannot now move away from the teaching of Gotama: the powers of confidence and joy, of intellect and awareness, hold me there. Whichever way this universe of wisdom goes, it draws me with it.

At this point in the sutta, the Buddha seems to appear through the power of Pingiya's visualization, speaking to encourage him in his practice.

'Pīngiya... other people have freed themselves by the power of confidence... you too should let that strength release you; you too will go to the further shore, beyond the draw of death.'

In this spirit of dialogue with the image of the Buddha, new meditation practices arose among practitioners of his teaching, calling up over time many different figures representing his wisdom, compassion, energy, charisma, kindness, directness and so on. These are *sādhana*s. In the Triratna Order the *sādhana* method is associated with 'spiritual rebirth', an aspect of spiritual progress that unfolds after insight realisation, known as 'spiritual death'. This unfolding may be attributed to the influence of the Buddhas because at this stage some kind of transformation may be felt to be coming from 'beyond' the practitioner.

Sādhana: Connection to the Buddha and his way of practice

Sādhana is a symbol of one's deepening 'going for refuge to the Buddha', of having made a strong commitment to practise his teaching in this life as a means of gaining Enlightenment for the sake of all beings. It is also a way of making contact with the Buddha more personally, by discovering him and deepening our appreciation of him through his image. For many practitioners, this act of opening to the Buddha's influence may become central to all other Buddhist practices.

*Sādhana*s are written texts. The form of the text is secondary to enabling the practitioner to make personal contact with the Buddha's presence through an image. The *sādhana*s used by the Triratna Buddhist Community came originally from (Indo-)Tibetan Buddhism since that was the tradition of the teachers who initiated Sangharakshita its founder. At the end of Sangharakshita's twenty years in India they encouraged him to practise the *sādhana*s and pass them on. Although he drew important lessons from Tibetan Buddhism, his teachers were happy for him to remain a Theravādin monk, as he was at that time, rather than to formally become part of their tradition. Their teachings were given in the spirit of Rimé, a Tibetan Buddhist movement which values the teachings of all the Tibetan schools. Perhaps we in the Triratna Buddhist Community can be said to be continuing something of the spirit of the Rimé tradition in the West as we seek to connect with the essentials of all forms of Buddhist practice. One important way we do this is by taking the Buddha, who originated them, as our touchstone.

The form of sādhana practice

The most fundamental form of *sādhana* practice is simply to sit in meditation, with a good foundation of concentration, mindfulness and trust. We then connect with the image of the Buddha, however we find ourselves perceiving it, and open ourselves to his teachings. There is no need for the image to be a visual one. Indeed the way 'teachings' generally are transmitted to us may well be quite other than what we conventionally expect - e.g. as words or clear images - though they may indeed appear in that way. Essentially we are receiving the blessing of the Buddha, his *adhiṣṭhāna*. As long as when we sit to meditate we have established *samatha* and right view, in the sense of awareness of *sūnyatā* and conditionality (*pratityasamutpada*), there will be some kind of experience of increased clarity or inspiration if we open ourselves to the Buddha's influence. The experience may be subtle, and we'll need to learn how to read it. But if we give enough time and trust to absorbing it, it will be of real spiritual value. In this way we receive directly from the Buddha experiences of inspiration whose significance we can explore, if we wish, using traditional texts and in discussion with teachers.

This simple, intuitive form of practice is the essence of *sādhana* meditation. It is akin to Just Sitting inasmuch as after we have contacted the image, we simply make ourselves open. It cultivates a mood of freshness and originality in relation to the Buddha that is essential for authentically exploring the more developed aspects of *sādhana* that will be outlined shortly.

An actual sādhanā text may give us a more concrete idea of what is involved. Such a text should be used as a jumping-off point rather than as a set of fixed instructions. In some ways the quasi-ritual form of this kind of sādhanā is best experienced as a mythic drama that unfolds the authentic message of the Buddha.

A sadhana meditation on Sākyamuni Buddha

- 1) First, generate śamatha.
- 2) Standing, pay respects to the shrine:

Namo Buddhāya
Namo Dharmāya
Namo Sanghaya
Namo Namah
OM
AH
HUM

Homage to the Buddha, Homage to the Dharma, Homage to the Sangha, Salutations, Om Ah Hum

Then, make a respectful bow.

Seated, recite the three refuges and the ethical precepts:

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhassa
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa

Homage to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha

Buddham saranam gacchāmi
Dhammam saranam gacchami
Sangham saranam gacchami
I go for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha

Dutiyampi Buddham saranam gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami
Dutiyampi Sangham saranam gacchami
Tatīyampi Buddham saranam gacchami
Tatīyampi Dhammam saranam gacchami
Tatīyampi Sangham saranam gacchami

For the second/third time I go for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha

Panātipatā veramani sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi
Adinnadanā veramani sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi
Kāmesu micchācārā veramani sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi
Musavada veramani sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi
Surameraya majja pamādatthanā veramāmi sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi

The five precepts:

- I undertake the training principle of not harming living beings.
- I undertake the training principle of not taking the not-given.
- I undertake the training principle of refraining from sexual misconduct.
- I undertake the training principle of refraining from false speech.
- I undertake to abstain from drink and drugs that cloud the mind.

With deeds of loving kindness, I purify my body.
With open-handed generosity, I purify my body.

With stillness, simplicity and contentment, I purify my body.
With truthful communication, I purify my speech.
With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.

The five precepts rendered positively

3) Affected by these verses of commitment and connection to the purpose of Dharma practice, now imagine a clear blue sky.

4) Imagine among green grass and spring flowers the great trunk and spreading branches of a magnificent tree filled with masses of heart shaped-leaves. It is the bodhi tree under which the Buddha gained full Enlightenment. Under it is a heap of soft kuśa grass where Śākyamuni Buddha silently sits cross-legged in meditation. He is wearing the saffron robes of a religious wanderer and holding a black begging bowl. His eyes are half-closed and he smiles with Compassion.

5) From his heart, a ray of brilliant golden light streams into our heart carrying the golden letters of the mantra OM MUNI MUNI MAHĀ MUNI ŚĀKYAMUNI SVĀHĀ. Slowly and mindfully recite the mantra, at first out loud and then internally, feeling that the Buddha's wisdom, compassion and purity are entering and transforming us from the unenlightened to the enlightened state. Recite the mantra many times and eventually sit for a while in samādhi before

6) dissolving the visualization back into the blue sky and

7) dedicating the benefits gained from doing the practice to the well-being of all:

May the merit gained in my acting thus go to the alleviation of the suffering of all beings. My personality throughout my existences, my possessions and my merit in all three ways I give up without regard for myself for the benefit of all beings. Just as the earth and other elements are serviceable in many ways to the infinite number of beings inhabiting limitless space, so may I become that which maintains all beings throughout space, as long as all have not attained peace.

It is clear from the way the practice begins with an open, infinite blue sky that the perspective here is one of spiritual death and rebirth. This image symbolizes the beauty and potential in the insubstantial nature of all experience. Experience never really consists of things, even though a thousand things appear: each one is conditioned and thus empty, in its own unique way, of any actual substance. The blue sky represents spiritual death, the collapse of what once appeared as a solid and substantial 'me' and my solid and substantial world. As a none-too-solid wall is actually a helpful condition if we want to demolish a dangerous old building, insight into insubstantiality is the condition that allows spiritual rebirth to flourish as open, transparent and unimpeded as the sky. 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.

Stages of sādhana practice



Sadhana practice generally consists of several stages. These may be adapted as the practitioner deepens his or her personal connection, but learning them helps to direct our imagination and to connect with the Buddha.

- 1) First, cultivate basic *śamatha*, perhaps through *mettā bhāvanā* or mindfulness of breathing.
 - 2) Next recollect the purpose of the practice and generate inspiration. This may be done in many ways, such as by chanting the verses above or by doing *pūja*, i.e. ritual celebration of the spiritual life - in other words by focusing on a particular form of the Buddha and worshipping it, making offerings, going for refuge to the Buddha's teaching, confessing shortcomings, rejoicing in our own good qualities and asking for the teaching. Another way of generating inspiration and recalling the purpose of practice is to imagine the lineage of enlightened teachers and their influence coming down to our own teacher, from whom we receive blessings and encouragement. This stage of a *sādhana* meditation may include generating *mettā* or *bodhicitta*, recollecting the impermanence of things or reflecting on the six elements. These are preliminaries for what follows.
 - 3) The main practice begins with reflection on the insubstantial and conditioned nature of all appearances and with imagination of the blue sky of emptiness.
 - 4) Then, out of that blue sky, imagine the Buddha, glorious in colour and form, appearing as though illuminated from within (though subjectively the form may seem less visual, depending on the way our imagination works). The text will prescribe particular colours and forms as a general indication of the Buddha's qualities, but this is a template for making a start. What is important is a sense of an actual connection, enhanced by the conviction that can come from the reflection on insubstantiality (*śūnyatā*). It is as though we are actually meeting the Buddha and being witnessed by him as a practitioner of his teaching.
 - 5) From this comes a sense of an open communication, strengthened by repeating the Buddha's name in the form of a mantra. Imagine the Buddha witnessing our sincere desire to practise and bestowing blessings in the form of coloured light rays entering our heart from his. This central moment of the drama is known as the transmission of *adhiṣṭhāna* (blessing), also referred to in tradition as empowerment, as it gives great confidence to connect with the living influence of the Buddha, our great spiritual ancestor.
- What does this influence consist of and how is it alive? The ancestral metaphor is helpful. We have all been subject since birth to innumerable influences, some of which have stamped their mark on us more than others. The main ones have been people - parents, teachers and friends - but we are also influenced by cultural movements of all kinds - music, media, language - as well as by the ideas we take in through education and reading. We walked into the ambit of some of these influences seemingly by accident. As a Dharma practitioner, we have somehow come into the range of the Buddha's influence; it may well have become our greatest influence. This is what *adhiṣṭhāna* represents: an intense transmission of 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 our time. And now it includes us and others like us.
- 6) Finally, when the *adhiṣṭhāna* has been received from the Buddha, the *sādhana* comes slowly to an end. The image may dissolve back into the blue sky it emerged from or straight into our heart. The dissolution may also be accompanied by reflection on the inseparability of form and emptiness. The sky is then itself dissolved and we then
 - 7) Dedicate the merit of doing the practice to the welfare of all beings.

Sādhana, imagination and insight



Sadhana is very rich as a practice. It is not just concerned with discovering the Buddha in one's own illumined imaginative experience. There are, at least in the more complex forms of sādhana, meditations within its meditations, such as the reflection on image and reality, rūpa (form) and śūnyatā (insubstantiality or emptiness). These meditations explore the beauty of the image of an ideal human being, on the one hand, and the truth of that image's real nature, on the other hand. The truth of things is that they are impermanent and have no substantial existence. The manner of their existence is deeply mysterious and cannot be described or understood with the ordinary mind, though with spiritual death come the beginnings of that

understanding.

So when we imagine the boundless space of the blue sky, we meditate on the fact that the Buddha image and the blue sky of śūnyatā are undivided, even in a sense identical. The image was never a substantial thing - its nature is śūnyatā - and śūnyatā is never a thing either: it is the insubstantial nature of things. The Buddha-form is empty, and its emptiness is no different from the form. As the image of the Buddha manifests out of the insubstantial nature of all things, we take that as the ideal object for reflection on rūpa and śūnyatā.

Formally, we do this reflection on the nature of form and the nature of śūnyatā both at the beginning and at the end of imagining the Buddha. At the point when we start to imagine the Buddha appearing out of the blue sky, we have a special opportunity to reflect on how form arises out of emptiness. And then, when the Buddha dissolves back into the blue sky, we have a special opportunity to reflect on how emptiness is not different from form. Often the śūnyatā mantra is recited at this point, to mark the transition: OM SVABHĀVAŚUDDHĀH SARVADHARMAH SVABHAVASUDDHO HAM. Mantras usually don't translate well but this one has a clear meaning: 'Om - 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 oneself, are pure because they are all śūnyatā, all perfectly empty of substance yet vividly real as forms.

We know we have created the image ourselves out of our imagination. Our capacity to imagine is no doubt not perfect. At least it's likely that our ability to find and to focus on this image is imperfect, and maybe on the whole we hardly perceive anything when we visualise. Yet we are imagining *something* when we sincerely make the attempt, and that something, whatever it is and however imperfect and strange it may be, will work as the image that connects us to the Buddha. What is relevant is that it emerges from śūnyatā and that it stands in our mind for the Buddha. When we visualize the Buddha as an image of form, colour and light, it is a coarse approximation of how we might experience the Buddha if he were actually present. It is no different with actual people we know who have distinct and recognizable 'atmospheres,' characteristics that can be recognized but not easily described. Visualising 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 our usual visual language.

It is interesting to reflect on the nature of form. What is it? We can say that there are visual forms we see, audible forms we hear and tangible forms we touch. Ideas and feelings also have a form, though not a visual one. These images, which engage our attention all the time, are in some way beyond verbal description. For example, we can say that a perfume has a form, and 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 very well the images I have of these odours. Even if I do find words that evoke those sensations, they will never be the same as the experience itself. It is similar with the image of the Buddha: we can only make rough attempts to paint a mental picture of the Buddha's form. That is partly because not being enlightened the imagination doesn't have much to go on when trying to imagine an enlightened being. Nonetheless, dwelling on the Buddha and his Awakening can place the mind in the much less limited space of our anticipation of awakened consciousness, and it offers the imaginative possibility of opening up to it.

Imagination uses stored memories of previous sense impressions - memories of all the sights seen, sounds heard and ideas conceived of - as a kind of 'clip art,' as ready-made images for the imaginative process. One can see such images playing freely in dreams and daydreams, but they also come sharply into focus when we think and imagine. The key to sadhana is to realize that the imagination is at play everywhere and all the time.

Imagination is a faculty that everyone uses in every moment. It is continually at work in all the various worlds we inhabit. That is not only in waking life but also dreams, meditation, distractions from it and transitional states after death, following the *Bardo Thodol* teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. Awareness continually changes but like matter and energy, it never stops altogether. Doing sādhanā helps to show the extent to which our world consists of self-created images. This deepens the realization of the Buddha's teachings of conditionality and insubstantiality and opens our heart to the transforming influence of the Dharma. By working with the imaginal faculty of the mind, sādhanā introduces a new level of mindfulness practice in which we explore how we continually create our own world.

While we are awake, we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and perceive mental objects - we experience the six sense consciousnesses, which essentially create our subjective lives. However, sense consciousness is not unique to waking life, for in dreams we also see, hear, touch, remember and sometimes plan in detail, driven by strong feelings and emotions. In fact, when we see the richness of consciousness in dreams, it is disconcertingly difficult to pin down what is special about the waking state. One naturally views waking life as the most real and significant part of one's existence; yet while it actually happens, a dream is as real to us as waking life. The world is always an interpretation of whatever data our senses present.

We might object that experiences in the dream state are not real sense impressions but memories of sense experiences mediated by the mind sense. True, but sense experience is mediated by the mind sense in waking life as well. 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 are hardly understood, yet they make it meaningful to us, whatever we are. Waking and dreaming are indeed very different, but one can learn a good deal from being mindful of both kinds of experience.

Because in the stages of integration and positive emotion we approach meditation through sense-withdrawal as a preliminary to dhyāna, we may come to view sense experience as pertaining to a lower form of consciousness. But actually dhyāna is not so much a matter of escaping sense experience as much as transcending habitual attachments to it. It's the attachment that keeps us in a distracted state. Withdrawal from the senses in meditation, as when we close our eyes and focus attention away from sounds and ideas, is a method of temporarily transcending sense attachment. In terms of the traditional layering of integrating consciousness, in dhyāna we temporarily go beyond kamaloka. However, kāmāloka is not the realm of the senses but the realm of sense desire in which the relationship to the senses has been distorted by unhelpful emotions. The emotions that we habitually generate towards objects in our world tend to solidify the way in which we experience those objects, until the whole process congeals and sets the world in particular, narrow

forms. This ingrained habit is what prevents imagination from taking wing. Within the dhyanic realm of rūpaloka the internal sense bases, freed from contact with coarse external objects, operate in a more visionary way. Even when we are not meditating, sense experience in itself is perfectly pure and undistorted. We cover that experience over with emotional habits and expectations which deprives us of some interesting material for insight inquiry.

The intrinsic purity of sense experience is explored through a deeper application of mindfulness that occurs in sādhana meditation as we start to notice how we continually create the world we inhabit. It is a story we tell ourselves using sense memories; and as we discover ourselves doing that, we recognise the faculty of imagination used in sādhana. Actually, in normal life, we are imagining everything - from what we might have for dinner, to what it might be like to meet someone, to how that person themselves might feel. We imagine your spiritual teacher, imagine the Buddha, imagine other people generally. We in fact imagine them when meeting face to face. It takes an act of imagination to see who someone else is and empathise with them. We even imagine ourselves! Indeed, we do so more than anything else. This endless imaginative play is simply the way the mind works. To see it happening allows us to free its prodigious energies and enable a far more effective imagination of the state of Enlightenment and its embodiment in Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and enlightened teachers. This brings us closer to them and to our potential to be like them.

Imagining a Buddha, however, might be 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 inspiration and eventually to 'possess' us with the essence of awakening. In using the traditional iconographies (such as a tawny light, a sword and a book of wisdom for Mañjuśhosa, white snowy radiance for Vajrasattva and red sunset glory for Amitābha), the sādhana texts help us make a relatively coarse, cartoon like connection with the 'Buddha-nature' that is potential in us. The potential is in the expanded, self-transcended, insightful mind that is so much beyond us that it makes just as much sense to speak of the Buddha as existing outside us, which is how one usually conjures up the Buddha in these visualizations. One does all one can to imagine the Buddha externally, but what eventually happens transcends 'internal' and 'external.' The sincerity of our attempt to make a bridge allows the awakened consciousness to come and 'inhabit' the experience of sādhana we're creating.

This process through which the real Buddha inhabits our constructed, cartoon like image is traditionally described as follows. The image we 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 bond or commitment that we make (at ordination, for example) to become awakened through practising this particular sādhana and that the Buddha has made through his vow to liberate all beings, including us. We evoke the Buddha through ritually worshipping him or her, recollecting *sūnyatā*, creating an image and imagining ourselves somehow connecting with it. So far, all this is something we do ourselves, but we are also creating the conditions for something that we cannot imagine to come from the 'other side.' Until that bridge becomes actual we can only pray, have faith and make ourselves receptive; and provided we fulfil our 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 us 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; indeed the notion is satirized by the Buddha in the Pali scriptures. But practitioners who believe in God have spiritual experiences like those we are discussing, so they naturally attribute them to the deity they believe in. Buddhism would question their attribution but not their experience, for all spiritual traditions must use language in their attempts to point towards what ultimately cannot be expressed in words. The Buddha believed that his way of putting things in terms of universal conditionality and insubstantiality - was a more helpful guide to practice than expressions in substantialist language.

Sādhana: practice in the round

Though the term 'sādhana' generally refers to the imagination of a particular Buddha-form as encapsulated in a specific ritual text, it can also be used in a broader sense to mean our entire practice in all its aspects centring on the Buddha. Sādhana is the complete body of all our Dharma practices such as mindfulness of breathing, Metta Bhāvanā, the Six-Element Practice, walking meditation, study, mindfulness, ethical practice and Just Sitting, all of which could be seen as a mandala with the Buddha at the centre. Each aspect of the mandala would contribute in some way to the experience of the Buddha and would keep his image alive. Practising any of these methods would enrich the mandala and maintain a connection with the central image. So the imagination of a Buddha and recitation of his mantra also develops and enriches the whole collection of spiritual practices, drawing out the specific spiritual qualities that we wish to emulate.



The Buddha's compassion is developed through the imagined form and metta bhavana, his wisdom through dharma study and insight practice, and his skilful means through the practice of the precepts.

Tho Ch'an teacher Huangbo Xiyun (d.850) said:

All the Buddhas and all sentient Deings 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 see before you.

'It is that which you see before you.' This is the key.

A Tara sadhana

What follows is another typical sadhana practice, a meditation to invoke the presence of the female Bodhisattva Green Tara, whose enlightened quality is fast-responding compassion. Like the previous example of Sakyamuni Buddha, the Tārā sādhana is a template, a ritual portal that provides a way to imagine the real Buddha, who is none other than Tarā, who is none other than the Buddha.

Begin with these verses of evocation:

From your sublime abode at the Potala
O Tara - born from the green letter TAM,
Whose light rescues all beings
Come with your retinue, I beg you.
The gods and demigods bow their crowns
To your lotus feet, O Tāra.
Oh you who rescue all who are destitute,
To you, Mother Tarā, I pay homage.

Now imagine that in every direction to infinity you see nothing but the deepest and most transparent blue sky. You also experience yourself as insubstantial and empty, of exactly the same nature as that infinite blue. Its open and infinite quality invests you with a sense of wonder and profound inspiration. You are experiencing your mind its greatest clarity and calmness; at the same time you are contemplating the ultimate insubstantiality that is its essential nature. After a while, you become aware of something that expresses this in an image. It is a single letter made of the softest green light that glows and vibrates in your heart. It is the Sanskrit letter 'tam' standing upon a horizontal disc of silvery light like the full moon. You imagine the tam visually while also hearing its timeless sound. The moon disc is in the calyx of a tiny flower, a lotus blossom of the lotus is in the heart of a goddess, the beautiful and gently smiling Bodhisattva Tara. She is the quintessence of compassion and she is also you. You are Tara.



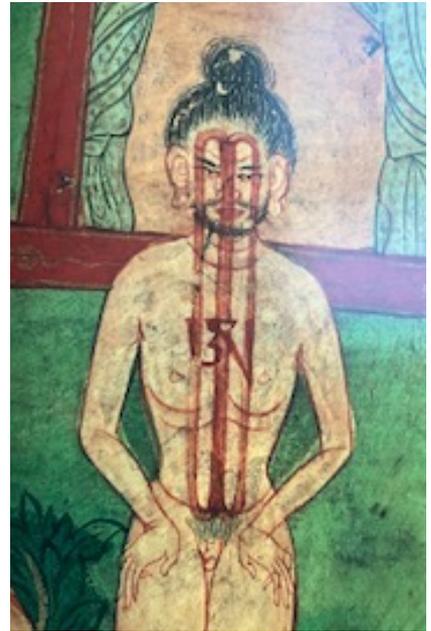
Seated cross-legged as if in meditation, but with her right foot outstretched as though to rise and aid a troubled being, Tarā is dressed in the silks and ornaments of a princess. Her right palm is opened outwards upon her knee in a gesture of giving. Her left hand is at her heart, its fingers expressing a quintessential point of the Dharma. Her radiance is a delightful green, like that of a spring leaf. As you sit experiencing this vision unfolding out of the openness of the sky, you feel as though formed of light, transparent and empty. Around the Tam at your heart the letters of Tāra's mantra, which contain the entire energy of her wise, quickly-responding kindness, begin to revolve anti-clockwise. Peacefully listening, you hearken to their sound: om tare tuttare ture svahā - om tare tuttāre ture svāhā- om tāre tuttāre ture svaha, over and over again. From the letters, which stand erect and dance gracefully around the central seed-syllable, emerges a diaphanous rainbow radiance. Rainbows curl upwards and downwards like incense smoke, and slowly your whole body, outwardly Tara, inwardly fills with rainbow light.

After a while, your/her body is so permeated with this light that it overflows and eight rainbows emerge from the crown of your head. At the tip of each rainbow is the tiny figure of a goddess bearing an offering: water, flowers, lights, incense, perfume, delicious fruit, refreshing drinks and music. The eight goddesses rise upwards, presenting their offerings to Buddha Sakyamuni at the zenith, far above your head. As the rainbow light continues to rise, the purest snow-white light begins to pour down from above in a stream of blessing that descends onto the crown of your head and enters your body. It flows into your heart, into the Tam; and from your responding heart the rays of light flow outwards towards all beings. All beings, you now notice, are all round you. You are sitting in the midst of a great multitude of beings of all kinds that stretches to infinity, all reciting the Tarā mantra, *om tāre tuttāre ture svāhā*. Over and over again the mantra sounds as the rays of light rise up from

Tara's heart and the rays of blessing pour down upon her heart and then out to help and heal the sufferings of all beings.

The Vajra Body

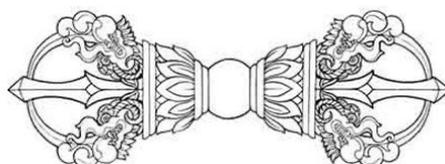
The Vajra Body is an essential element in sadhana practice. It is familiar to all practitioner with the seed syllables OM AH HUM etc. imagined within the body of both practitioner and the Buddha at the focus of their practice. It is 'elemental' body experience, one's experience of the body rather than something that exists materially, and one that touches on the nature of our existence, birth and death. It is a meditation practice in itself and it goes under many names and crops up in different cultures. Some people refer to it as the inner body, I've often called it the subtle body and I think Reginald Ray may call it the energy body. It is an experience that can be cultivated and then tuned into in relation to meditation. If you are an experienced meditator, you may already be somewhat tuned into it, because it is simply how the body starts to appear over years of regular meditation. As you keep bringing awareness to the body, you become aware of various areas and kinds of sensation.



For example if you take your relaxed attention to that area, the crown of the head feels in a very particular way. It has particular sensations and also associations that are quasi-emotional. It is the same with the throat, the heart area, the area below and behind the navel, the area around the sexual organs, and the area at the perineum or pelvic floor. These are centres of energy known as chakras, meaning in Sanskrit 'wheel,' suggesting a fixed point with movement around it. These six are perhaps the most distinct in the body, but there are many such points. Anywhere you place your attention in the body will have its own very particular set of sensations and energy.

We come across energy centres in the context of sadhana meditation. We visualise Vajrasattva, for example, with Om Ah Hum, white, red and blue, at his crown, throat and heart. Prajnaparamita has Om Ah Hum Dhih at her crown, throat, heart and navel, glowing yellow, white, gold and blue. It is from these centres that a connection is made. We make these connections in sadhana meditation in the knowledge, deepened through an evocation of sunyata, that the ultimate nature of being is a vast unknown that is not separate from our mind right now. Sadhana then becomes a medium for this exploration through opening up our imagination beyond self-clinging, beyond individual life and death. With that sense of vast potential, calling to mind Vajrasattva or Prajnaparamita enables blessings to flow, opening out our unawakened being.

The vajra body offers a framework for this, enabling us to tune our being in a way that somehow resonates with the energy of awakening, so that after a while that resonance becomes associated with the feeling at the energy centres. Looking into the body becomes a means for maintaining samaya or mindfulness of our real, vajra nature—the fact that it is in our nature to awaken to Buddhahood. If you look at a vajra you can see this symbolised in the two sets of five spokes that branch out in opposite directions from the central sphere. One set of spokes represent the five skandhas, the ever present aspects of our ordinary being: form, feeling, recognition, volition and consciousness. The other represents these transformed into the five aspects of wisdom: the central



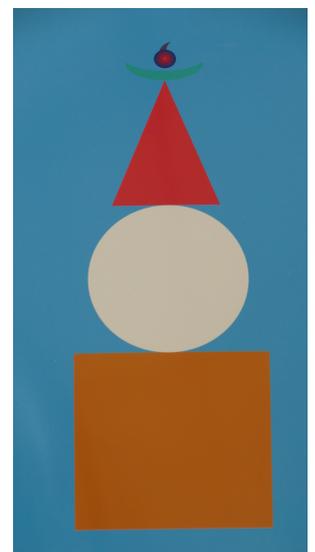
and basic wisdom of Suchness (or sunyata), then the ‘mirror’ wisdom in which the content of awareness is realised to be inseparably united with its knower as in a mirror, the wisdom ‘of equality’ that, having dropped ego based preference, sees all things as equally sunyata, the wisdom of ‘specific investigation’ in which the particularity of each thing’s emptiness is realised, and the wisdom of ‘accomplishment’ which is wisdom’s energetic manifestation: what wisdom does, and how it behaves.

The centres at the perineum, back of the navel, heart, throat and crown are positioned along the central channel, the core of the inner body. This again is an experience that emerges from long familiarity with the body in meditation. The central channel is conceived as an extended opening from crown to perineum. There is no physical structure; the central channel is simply that sense of openness arisen through close observation of feeling and sensation in the body which extends up inside the space of the body and forms a kind of a channel of awareness right through it.

Historically, the methodology of the central channel and the system of chakras, and the energies that move between the chakras along the central channel, arose as part of the development of the Vajrayana. Specific vajrayana practices are based on awareness of the central channel, such as the generation of psychic warmth or tummo. This was Milarepa’s practice, the first of the six Dharmas that his teacher Marpa learned from Naropa.

We can imagine that inner body practice and working with energy must have evolved over a very long time. Perhaps variants were passed orally among the Wanderers, the Sramanas out of which the Buddha’s movement grew. We see echoes in Daoism and in some aspects of the Greek gymnasium, which is contemporary with the Buddha. Unfortunately very little is written in the Indian tradition, the main explorations being within Tantric Buddhism, Jainism and Saivism. However the vajra body is certainly and perhaps originally a Buddhist tradition. The first ever documentation of hatha yoga methods, in the eleventh century, is in a Buddhist work, the Amrtasiddhi. The history of these practices is hard to trace, since the background is not so much the monastic institutions of the late Mahayana, but the outer circle of lay Buddhist practice that spread out around those institutions.

Because it enables deep mindfulness and acceptance of feeling and sensation, inner body practice calms and opens the mind. It also brings insight, because the whole approach of vajra body is radically existential. It touches on the very nature of the body, the life-and-death nature of our existence. It opens us to the body’s elemental nature, as perhaps for some the six elements practice has done. Here ‘elemental’ does not imply what is physical so much as the way we experience physicality. The elements manifest the complex array of different appearances, solid, liquid, moving, hot, cold, etc. They are known as the great illusory spirits, the mahabhuta, because the way things exist is not at all as we assume. Existence is a tricky thing to understand. Perhaps it cannot be understood. But at least as experience becomes clearer, the objects of the senses are realised to be inseparable from the subject perceiving them. One realises how the experience of any object will always be somehow subjective, for it is mediated by the senses and recognition which are aspects of the subject. The elements of earth, water, fire and air are the same as the skandha of rupa or form, the world of forms we assemble through our seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and the inner processes of imagination, a never ending experience that spans the different existential phases of birth, waking, dreaming, death, and whatever worlds arise after death. Inner body practice works directly with our elemental nature with all this in mind.



Conclusion

Sādhana is a complex form of Dharma practice, yet it still involves concentration, positive emotion and reflection on the Dharma. It incorporates both samatha and vipaśyanā. Samatha is accumulated through concentration on the image and repetition of the mantra, which is beautiful and naturally brings forth helpful emotions. Many sādhanas include the development of mettā and the brahma vihāras as a preliminary stage, and a vipaśyanā reflection is often included in the sequence of the ritual. The main vipaśyanā aspect, however, comes through the image itself: an experienced sādhanika is able to create an extremely vivid image while understanding it to be a mental creation, fashioned from the insubstantial reality from which everything arises. As mentioned, a sādhanika may incorporate for reflection Dharma verses that encapsulate insights. The various elements of the practice also contain insights in symbolic 'seed' form: the clear blue sky, the mantra, the body expression, hand gestures, form, clothing and so on. These have a symbolic significance that grows within the mind over years of daily practice. Even without reflections such as these, sādhanika is an excellent śamatha practice: the beauty of the mantra's sound, together with the form and colour, integrate the mind and induce the rich calm of dhyāna. Vipāśyanā is brought into play when the imagination is 'embroidered' with discursive reflection and the direct seeing of its various insight-related components.

To some in the West traditional images such as Green Tārā can be obscure and difficult to relate to, especially as the relationship with our own native mythologies and local gods has been suppressed by the sustained antipathies of religion, rationalism and materialism. We all need to find our own way into Buddhist imagery, and perhaps one obvious way to do this is by imagining the discoverer of the Dharma, Sakyamuni. I respond easily to purely archetypal images such as Tara, but it seems important to connect her qualities with those of the founder of Buddhism. Sakyamuni Buddha is also in some ways an archetypal figure, yet he was also a living human being whose life has been well documented. By reading the various biographies, one can get a clear sense of his character and come to see him more in the round. And by studying his teachings in depth and following his activities in the extensive Pali scriptures, we can get a very full picture of what he, and any awakened being, is like. This will inform our image of other Buddha and Bodhisattva figures such as Tārā too, as they express the same awakened qualities.

‘Tell me, Gotama, what kind of vision and virtuous conduct would justify calling someone "calmed"?’

‘... Someone not dependent upon the past, not to be reckoned in the present, and without preference in the future,’ said the Buddha. ‘A real sage, of restrained speech, who speaks in moderation without anger, trembling, boasting, remorse or arrogance... Without desire for pleasant things, not given to pride, gentle and quick-witted, someone beyond over-conviction and dispassion.

‘It’s not for material gain that he trains, nor is he upset at the lack of it. He’s not obstructed by craving or greedy for flavours. He’s equanimous, always mindful, and has no haughtiness: he doesn’t consider himself equal, superior or inferior to anyone in the world.

‘Knowing the Dharma, he’s independent, without craving for becoming or otherwise. He is at peace, indifferent to sensual pleasures. Nothing ties him; he’s crossed beyond attachment.

‘He possesses no sons, cattle, fields, or land. Nothing is taken up or laid down; and since he doesn’t incline towards the kind of offences people might accuse him of, he’s never agitated by their words: greed and avarice are gone...

‘So Someone who can call nothing his own, who doesn’t grieve over non-existent problems or get lost amidst mental phenomena - he’s rightly called “calmed.”’

The methods laid out here, and the system of practice that underlies them, can bring all these qualities to life in us. The Buddha himself devised most of them. His story gives us an image, a picture of his total freedom from craving, hatred and delusion. 'Gentle, quick-witted, not given to pride' - yes, he's a human being like you and me but with a gentle strength and disconcerting lack of compromise that allows him to see into the nature of things. It enables him to be a human resource and a friend like no other.

It is a challenge to imagine the Buddha because his qualities are so rarely found combined in one person. Maybe you could imagine them combining in you? In any case, these are the qualities we need for true happiness and spiritual freedom. They can be drawn out by the practices of ethics, meditation and wisdom explored in terms of the developing imagination - the heart-mind that can be trained to open, be still and see the truth. By applying the core principles of meditation, systematized in the five phases of integration, positive emotion, spiritual death, spiritual rebirth and mindfulness, everyone can learn to become fully aware, tranquil and filled with deep insight.