



Buddhism Level 3

Sangharakshita's System of Dharma Life



Over the next six weeks we shall be looking at a very important, self-contained and comprehensive model of spiritual life that very clearly sums up the practical interpretation of the Buddha's message within the Triratna Buddhist Community. As Dayanandi (the women's mitra convenor here at the MBC) comments, "it contains the whole of the (Buddhist) path in principle, laying out the main points on the way".

The system originated in Sangharakshita's well-established teaching of 'the System of Meditation' that dates from a talk he gave back in 1978, describing 4 stages and their specific meditation practices. More recently, however, Sangharakshita and Subhuti (one of his longest-standing disciples and a key thinker in the Order) have expanded that model to encompass all of 'spiritual life', this time with 5 key stages or 'dimensions' (and acknowledging the meditation practice – 'just sitting' – that applies to the fifth).

As a starting point, we need to identify what we mean by the word 'spiritual', and clarify how the 5 stages or dimensions relate to us. To borrow from Maitreyabandhu at the London Buddhist Centre (see the 'resources' listing at the end of this document), we can say that our human life is a 'spiritual issue' simply because we're going to die – the glaring paradox is that this is a completely unavoidable truth, but one that we spend most of our time inwardly denying. Is this too strong a statement? You might want to examine your own experience in the light of this question. The five stages or dimensions are not some external teaching – rather, they're intrinsic to our very lives. In other words, any spiritual growth and maturation that we might achieve can only take place by means of them.

We'll be looking at each of the five dimensions in weeks 2 to 6 of the course, identifying their characteristics and discussing our relationship with them. In the following sections of this document we'll look, in outline, at what they consist of.

1. Integration (mindfulness): As we've already acknowledged, we know that sickness, old age and death are 'the great problems of life', but we don't behave as though we do. This can be seen as demonstrating a lack of integration – in other words, we don't see these three truths with the **whole** of ourselves. We can also add that we're alienated – this means that we see life at one step (if not more) removed, thanks to the scattered nature of our minds (and, to some extent, the alienating effect of communications technology). The positive side of this state of affairs is that we can work to become more integrated – the intention here is that, as

we become “grown up, happy, healthy human beings” (to quote Maitreyabandhu) we can increasingly see things as they really are, and act appropriately. Sangharakshita puts it a little differently: “We get ourselves functioning as a smoothly-working whole, not a jumble of bits and pieces and fragments of selves, all jostling for supremacy”.

The key to achieving greater integration is that we need to know ourselves – working out the ‘kind of creature we are’ and how best to work with our own unique ‘psychic landscape’ (Maitreyabandhu). One of the most powerful supports to this personal work is that we need to be, as much as possible, in an objective situation where we can be ourselves (you might want to think about how often this isn’t really the case in aspects of your own life situation). Ideally, we need the support of a community and culture in which we can freely reveal ourselves to our peers, and enjoy them doing the same to us. Of course, this ideal is what we find in the sangha jewel at its best.

Integration needs to take account of the various levels (*niyāmas*) at which **conditioned co-production** operates, apart from the ethical or ‘karmic’ level. For example (as Subhuti has written), it includes such areas as taking proper care of our body, as the vehicle of our further (i.e. spiritual) evolution. Also in terms of evolution, we need to be aware of the instinctual demands of our animal nature, if it is not to dominate us in one way or another. Then again, we need to recognise the influence upon of us of our own family and cultural conditioning in shaping our psychological responses.

The meditation practice most explicitly connected with the dimension of integration is the **Mindfulness of Breathing**. In it, we practice noticing the body and its natural movements, and avoid further ‘disintegration’ through becoming self-critical when our minds become distracted (as they are guaranteed to do!). More generally, we can also practise awareness of other people and of the natural world around us.

2. **Positive Emotion (skilful intention):** To put this in its context, emotional positivity is no more than an idea if it’s not based on integration – without the latter it won’t be based on enough self-knowledge. If we are developing self-awareness (i.e. becoming more integrated), we then choose how best to act. It’s important to realise that this isn’t just about feeling, so a better term than ‘positive emotion’ may actually be ‘skilful intention’ (which comes from the Sanskrit *kusala karma*). With this skilful intention, our actions can become ‘helpful, fruitful, productive and positive’ (Maitreyabandhu). Sangharakshita lists the characteristics of positive emotion (or skilful intention) as ‘friendliness, compassion, joy, equanimity, faith and devotion’ – you might notice how close this list is to the attributes making up Perfect Emotion that you might have covered in Buddhism Level 2. He also says that “...in as much as positive emotion is something that moves, not something static - this is also the stage of energy”.

We can say that this stage of the path involves 'educating our volition' so that it is more genuinely positive – i.e. more helpful, skilful and intelligent. This is the stage in which we act for the benefit of others, practising reaching out beyond ourselves. What it isn't, however, is a sort of self-hating sacrifice – remember that self-knowledge is a prerequisite, and self-knowledge involves self-love. This emphasises again (in case the connection isn't yet clear!) the importance of the connection between the stages of integration and positive emotion. We can't effectively help either ourselves or others until we know ourselves!

You might remember how Buddhism makes an intimate connection between action (the direct translation of *karma*) and mind – for example, the very first verses of the *Dhammapada* talk about actions being dependent upon mind. Technically, Buddhism sees action as taking place in the three areas of body, speech and mind. The significance of the last of these, perhaps not immediately obvious, is that it involves **volition** - i.e. what we mean by what we do. As we already know, this is the working ground of Buddhist ethics; it's our volition (or intention) that can make the difference between the resulting action of body or speech having a beneficial (skilful) or harmful (unskilful) outcome.

Positive states of mind are not just important in their giving rise to skilful actions, however. They also have a powerful effect on our delusive 'self-clinging'. Any positive, creative state of mind makes our identification with self lighter and more flexible: any negative, reactive state of mind causes us to identify with self in a heavier, more fixed way.

Of course, the meditation practice most associated with positive emotion is the Metta Bhavana. Perhaps you could consider this question – does using the term 'skilful intention' instead of 'positive emotion' suggest a different emphasis to this practice?

- 3. Spiritual Death (vision):** What we're describing here is dramatic, even shocking! Obviously, we're not talking about death in the literal sense, but rather in the sense of the giving up of our cherishing of 'self'. There's another important inter-dependence here – without **positive emotion** the experience of spiritual death will just be too threatening.

Maitreyabandhu uses an attractive metaphor – he talks about "cleaning the window of our self – making our self more transparent so that a light from beyond our self can shine through into us". This doesn't mean that the 'light' comes from some supernatural source – it's more a question of it being there in us, but revealed more and more as the self 'gets out of the way'. In other words, as we become more 'selfless' (think carefully about what this word means!), we can see that our idea of 'self' is a construction – i.e. a very significant **delusion**. For this reason, we can say that spiritual life is always a movement away from self and towards selflessness.

In this stage, therefore, we give up on 'self' – even on a better self that may have been developed through our ethics and meditation. In

specifically Buddhist terms, we need to die spiritually if a Buddha is to be born (which is quite different from stating that 'I aim to become a Buddha!').

In Dayanandi's terms, there is an important connection between spiritual death and Perfect Vision (which you might have encountered in Buddhism Level 2). "When we really see something, really understand it and know it deeply, we are changed by it". She warns that, without this profound change, 'spiritual life' can become nothing more than a more refined sort of selfishness.

In practical terms, we know that we're making progress in this stage if we recognise that we're a little less selfish (in the everyday sense of the word) now than we once were. As Dayanandi makes clear, "This is the only test" – there's actually nothing more technical to it! There are also tangible activities that help us towards spiritual death: apology and confession when we recognise that we've acted unskillfully, and a readiness to let go of expectations that haven't been (or can't be) fulfilled.

The meditation practice associated with spiritual death, and normally practised after ordination (or soon before) is called the **Six Element** practice. This involves the systematic contemplation of 'self' in terms of the universal energies symbolically associated with earth, water, fire, air, space and consciousness. In meditations like this we have the chance to realise that the 'self' on which, in a sense, we base our very world, can not truly be found within any of these elements. For this reason, Buddhist thought speaks of Emptiness (*sunyata*) as the ultimate reality. This does not mean, as is sometimes thought, that 'nothing exists' – it's more that the mental constructs from which we build our 'mind-made world' don't really have any ultimate reality. This is what is being said in the Heart Sutra and other scriptures from what we collectively call the Perfection of Wisdom sutras.

- 4. Spiritual Rebirth (transformation):** This stage can be described as the experience of something 'beyond us' breaking into us – as Maitreyabandhu describes it, "a supra-personal, non-egoistic energy". Through this energy we are completely transformed. In fact, the full and complete manifestation of this transformation is complete awakening from the ego-based poisons of greed, hatred and delusion – in other words, Enlightenment itself. In the meantime, though, the degree to which we are transformed is dependent on the degree to which we've 'let go' of self in the stage of spiritual death. It's important to remember that spiritual death isn't annihilation, or anything like it (although a common misconception about Buddhism in the West sees it as being so). Rather, it's an exchange of the 'captivity of the illusion of self' (Maitreyabandhu) for **freedom**. This, ultimately, is what spiritual rebirth is about – as described by the Buddha himself in the *Udana*: "Just as the great ocean has but one taste, the taste of salt, so this Dharma has but one taste, the taste of freedom."

Of course, the stage of spiritual rebirth doesn't stand alone (all things are interconnected, after all!). We've already noted that true freedom can't be

reached until we've 'let go' in the stage of **spiritual death**. In addition, without **integration** we will tend to want to appropriate any visionary experiences that go along with spiritual rebirth. At worst, we may then indulge in 'spiritual bragging', as Maitreyabandhu describes it. If our integration is well-developed, and we also have skilful intentions, we can successfully recognise the energy associated with spiritual rebirth as 'supra-personal' and 'non-egoistic'.

Members of the Triratna Buddhist Order usually make use of a **visualisation** meditation in connection with the stage of spiritual rebirth. This involves a contemplation of an archetypal Buddha or Bodhisattva, in other words a specific set of characteristics (compassion, wisdom, power, purity or others) of the Enlightened mind.

- 5. Spiritual receptivity (spontaneous compassionate activity):** The stage of spiritual receptivity is woven through our practice of the other four dimensions. It involves making sure that we are relaxed (which can be a considerable challenge in our culture!) and **open**. We can be open in many different ways – to our own internal experience, other people, the natural world, the arts and, ultimately, the truths of reality as taught to us by the Buddha.

This stage can be viewed slightly differently depending on whether the five dimensions as a whole are viewed as a path (leading from A to B, as it were – what Sangharakshita has sometimes called a 'path of regular steps'), or a simultaneous practice of all five at the same time. The latter interpretation is sometimes described as a **mandala** or even as a 'path of irregular steps', because we will effectively be working on different dimensions at different times. If we choose the model of the path, we can refer to the final stage as being 'spontaneous compassionate activity'. This would be how an Enlightened being would be perceived by other people. The complete openness (or 'equanimity') of a Buddha would mean that (s)he just wouldn't have to try – compassionate activity towards other beings would be a natural, spontaneous response to living in the world. In Dayanandi's words, "Enlightenment is not a full stop but a state of endlessly expanding creativity. The ever changing flow of energy that is us, continues to evolve freely, spirals out in a way that is totally beyond our vision."

These, then, are the Five Stages (in the 'path' model) or dimensions (in the 'mandala') of Dharma life. They are a hugely valuable tool, drawing directly from the Buddha's teaching, but brought to us with great clarity by Sangharakshita. In the seminar in which he originally introduced the five stages, he made a very bold statement of just how important the model is:

"This is your spiritual life and this is your spiritual practice. These are the things with which you are basically concerned. You can, as it were forget about all the other formulations, all about the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path. On the practical side, this is all that you really need or all that you really

need to think in terms of. What so ever has been said by all the different Buddhist teachers in the course of several hundred years of development is all really contained in this in principle.”

We can also see the Five Stages in a more simplified and even more practical light – for example, Sangharakshita has rendered them as a set of five ‘precepts’:

1. Keep up the effort to be mindful and aware, and be as ‘together’ as possible, as **integrated** as possible.
2. Remain in **as positive a mental state** as you possibly can.
3. Do not lose sight of your **ultimate goal** at any time.
4. Whatever you’ve realised or discovered or seen on **the highest level of your being**, apply it at any time to every level of your being.
5. Do your best for other people, do what you can to help people.

To try to put the Five Stages in their proper context – the quest for Enlightenment itself – we’ll finish with an inspiring passage from Dayanandi:

“Whatever it is, much of our practice of the Dharma is geared towards us helping see reality as it really is. Everything unfolds from here. It is the heart of transformation. Accepting how things are, learning how to slow down, open our eyes, ears and heart, so we can receive our experience without wanting to control or change it. Everything comes from there - all compassion and wisdom. We very gradually, in glimpses and heightened moments, learn to see the world clearly, as it is, as an unending flow of interconnected experience. We see that we cannot ever have or own anything. It all slips through our fingers. It cannot be held back, it is impermanent, elusive and all the more beautiful for that. It’s like a wild animal, free and not to be caged, glorious in its naturalness.”

Additional resources: for more on the Five Dimensions (or stages) individually, I recommend:

1. **Dayanandi’s** 2011 Sangha Night series ‘The five great stages of the spiritual path’ - on the MBC web site (<http://www.manchesterbuddhistcentre.org.uk>– go to the ‘Talks’ page, then add the tag ‘Dayanandi’ and click ‘Submit’). There are also links to short, edited PDF versions of each talk.
2. **Maitreyabandhu’s** short talks on the London Buddhist Centre site (<http://www.lbc.org.uk> – go to ‘Buddhist talks’ then ‘LBC Videosite’ and choose the playlist ‘The Journey and the Guide’)
3. **Subhuti’s** recent series of talks at Padmaloka (<http://www.padmaloka.org.uk/resources/mp3-talks> for a series of 9 talks of roughly an hour each). These recordings are also on Free Buddhist Audio (<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com>).