System of Practice

Study material for your retreat at Tiratanaloka

Study area 1. Integration

Study area 2. Positive Emotion

Study area 3. Receptivity

Study area 4. Spiritual Death

Study area 5. Spiritual Rebirth

Study area 6. Bringing The Aspects Together

Introduction to the Handbook

The purpose of this handbook is to give you the opportunity to look in depth at the material that we will be studying on the **System of Practice** retreat at Tiratanaloka.

Before this handbook was produced, we asked people to read or listen to Subhuti's talks he gave in 2013 at Padmaloka called 'The Five Aspects of Sangharakshita's System of Dharma Life'. These talks gave a new clarity and depth to understanding the System of Practice. However, they were given in a specific context at a specific time, and some of the talks needed updating with more of a focus on the needs of those who come to Tiratanaloka. The team at Tiratanaloka decided to go back to Bhante's original material and supplement that material with discussion groups and talks informed by Subhuti's exploration.

Sangharakshita's thinking on the System of Practice developed over time. He first explored the 'five great stages of the spiritual path' in a seminar, held in 1976 at Padmaloka, on Nagarjuna's Precious Garland. In this seminar he talked about the stages as movements within one's whole spiritual life. It is clear he is extemporising and the language he uses doesn't have the clarity and systemisation of his later explanations. However, it does have the simplicity and directness of him working out how his experience of the traditional Buddhist path could be usefully translated to the experience of Buddhism practised in the modern world. The terms he uses for each stage are different than in his later exposition, which was two years later when he gave the talk 'A System of Meditation' during an Western Buddhist Order convention. Here he uses the same stages to map out the relationship between the meditation practices he taught in a progressive system. In 1976 he talked about the stages as integration, positive emotion, vision, transformation and compassionate activity. These broadly correspond to the stages of integration, positive emotion, spiritual death, spiritual rebirth and receptivity in 'A System of Meditation'. However, the stages don't correspond exactly. For example, vision includes both spiritual death and rebirth, and spontaneous compassionate activity is more focussed on how transformation 'descends' into every aspect of our being, and we work for the good of the world. What this shows us is Bhante's thinking from a direct, personal exploration of a lived experience of the Dharma life, to a systemisation of that experience that helps us to identify what the path looks like and how we can practise it at each stage.

In 'Initiation into a New Life' and 'The Five Aspects of Sangharakshita's System of Dharma Life', Subhuti explored the stages as both a path and a mandala of practice. As a path we progress from one stage to another, incorporating each stage along the way. When we join the Order, we are moving from receptivity to spiritual death and rebirth. As a mandala of practice we are practising all stages at all levels of Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. The stages become aspects of the Dharma life.

In this handbook we give you material to study for each area we'll be studying on the retreat. For each topic we ask you to read the summary of each topic we will explore on the retreat. These are found in this handbook. Further reading is shown below.

We ask you to study this material, reflect on it and come prepared with questions or topics you would like to discuss. This will help you to get the most out of your retreat. You might even want to study the material with some of your friends. Throughout the material we've included questions about how the material relates to your own practice that we'd like you to think about in preparation for the discussion groups on the retreat.

It's important that you let us know if you have problems accessing any of the material we've asked you to read, as we'll be assuming that you have had a chance to look at it before you come.

All of us on the team at Tiratanaloka look forward to studying the material with you when you come here.

Reading

The extracts are taken from Sangharakshita's 1976 seminar on 'Nagarjuna's Precious Garland', and from his talk 'A System of Meditation'. Both are found in 'The Purpose and Practice of Buddhist Meditation: Complete Works Vol 5'.

It would be helpful if you could listen to the whole talk 'A System of Meditation', lecture 135, which can be found on freebuddhistaudio.com.

Further reading

Subhuti: 'Initiation into a New Life' This can be found on his website, subhuti.info, and in the booklet 'The Seven Papers' on lulu.com.

You could also listen to his 2013 Padmaloka talks, found on freebuddhistaudio.com, or buy the booklet of all of those talks from padmaloka.org.uk. The series is called 'The Five Aspects of Sangharakshita's System of Dharma Life'. If you do listen or read these talks, do bear in mind the context in which they were given.

Some of you will have done the 'Journey and the Guide' course at your local Buddhist Centre. This is a course based on the System of Practice and is available as a book by Maitreyabandhu. You can buy this from windhorsepublications.com.

Study area 1. Integration

From ‘Nagarjuna’s Precious Garland’, 1976

Extract from ‘The Purpose and Practice of Buddhist Meditation’

In Buddhist texts one finds different descriptions of the path, and some of them are very inspiring, but they don’t always agree. Sometimes, in fact, they’re very different, though at times they overlap. Some of these descriptions are very detailed and it’s possible to get rather lost in the detail. You can’t help wondering exactly where you are and what you have to do to get to the next stage or substage or even sub-substage. So I thought it might be useful to outline the main stages so far as we’re concerned, and indicate some connections with some of the traditional formulations of the path. It seems to me that we can regard the spiritual path as consisting of five great stages. They very roughly correspond to the five paths of the Indian Buddhist tradition but I won’t go into that comparison. I just want to give a straightforward account in terms of our own needs and our own experience.

The first stage is the stage of mindfulness and awareness. One can think in terms of the four foundations of mindfulness or the four dimensions of awareness, but that is a detail. The main point is that the first thing that one has to do is to develop awareness, especially self-awareness, which in turn means self-integration. We bring all our scattered bits together, we integrate ourselves, we overcome conflict and disharmony within ourselves. We get ourselves functioning as a smoothly working whole, not a jumble of bits and pieces, or a heap of fragments of selves all jostling for supremacy. You can begin to see that this is quite a big task in itself. But this is the first stage: giving birth to oneself as an integrated person, a self-aware individual.

From ‘A System of Meditation’, 1978

Extract from ‘The Purpose and Practice of Buddhist Meditation’

In such a series, first comes the mindfulness of breathing. There are various reasons why this meditation comes first in the list. First, it is a ‘psychological’ method, in the sense that the newcomer can look at it psychologically; one does not need to know any distinctively Buddhist teaching to practise it. Secondly, it is a very important practice, inasmuch as it is the starting point for the development of mindfulness in general – mindfulness with regard to all the activities of life. We start by being mindful of our breath, but that is only the beginning. We have to try to extend this until we are aware of all our bodily movements and aware of exactly what we are doing. We must become aware of the world around us and aware of other people. We must become aware, ultimately, of Reality itself. But we start with the mindfulness of breathing.

The development of mindfulness is also important because it is the key to psychical integration. When we first learn to meditate, it's quite possible that we do not yet have any real individuality. We are usually just a bundle of conflicting desires, even conflicting selves, loosely tied together with the thread of a name and an address. These desires and selves are both conscious and unconscious. Even the limited mindfulness developed by practising the mindfulness of breathing helps to bind them together; it at least tightens the string a little bit, to make a more recognizable, identifiable bundle of these different desires and selves.

To carry it a bit further, the practice of mindfulness helps to create real unity and real harmony between the different aspects (as they have now become) of ourselves. In other words, it is through mindfulness that we begin to create true individuality. Individuality is essentially integrated; an unintegrated individuality is a contradiction in terms. Unless we become integrated, unless we are really individuals (which means integrated), there is no real progress. There is no real progress because there is no commitment, and you cannot commit yourselves unless there is just one individuality to commit itself. Only an integrated person can commit himself, because all his energies are flowing in the same direction; one energy, one interest, one desire, is not in conflict with another. Awareness, mindfulness, at so many different levels, is therefore of crucial importance – it is the key to the whole thing.

But there is a danger: that in the course of our practice of awareness we develop what I have come to term 'alienated awareness'. Alienated awareness arises when we are aware of ourselves without actually experiencing ourselves. [1] Therefore, as well as practising awareness, mindfulness, it is very important that we establish contact with our emotions, whatever they are. Ideally we will establish contact with our positive emotions, if we have any or can develop any, but for the time being, we may have to establish contact with our negative emotions. It is better to establish real, living contact with our negative emotions (which means acknowledging them and experiencing them but not indulging them) than to remain in that alienated state and not experience our emotions at all.

Questions for reflection

1. Why do we need a path at all? Would it not be enough to follow our own interests with regards to the spiritual life?
2. How does mindfulness or awareness help us to be more integrated and more of an individual?
3. Subhuti talks about this stage as taking responsibility for our moral agency and going forth from blame. In what areas do we need to bring more awareness and take more responsibility?

[1] See Sangharakshita's lecture *Alienated Awareness,* or *The Purpose and Practice of Buddhist Meditation,* Complete Works Vol ? part 2, Chapter 5

4. What is the central and organising principle of our lives around which we can integrate, that can create a ‘real unity and real harmony between the different aspects’ of ourselves?
5. How can we guard against ‘alienated awareness’?

Study area 2. Positive Emotion

From ‘Nagarjuna’s Precious Garland Seminar’, 1976

Extract from ‘The Purpose and Practice of Buddhist Meditation’

Then comes the stage of positive emotion: friendliness, compassion, joy, equanimity, faith, and devotion. Because positive emotion is something that moves, not something static, this is also the stage of energy. In this stage one tries to make oneself as emotionally positive as possible, one overcomes all negative emotions. One tries not only to develop one’s emotions but to refine them, developing not simply positive emotions but even spiritual emotions. Here the whole subject of spiritual beauty becomes important. So in this stage one develops emotions to a very high pitch of intensity indeed. This is also the stage of meditation – samādhi – because these positive emotions and the energies that you generate carry you through all the levels of dhyāna. But it’s not simply about sitting in meditation. It’s being emotionally positive whatever you are doing, whether you are sitting and meditating, or working, or talking, or just being quietly by yourself.

From ‘A System of Meditation’, 1978

It is here that the mettā bhāvanā and similar practices come in: not just mettā (Sanskrit maitrī, Pāli mettā), loving-kindness, by itself, but also the other brahma vihāras: karuṇā, muditā, and upekṣā (Pāli upekkhā) (compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity respectively), as well as śraddhā (Pāli saddhā), faith. All of these are based on mettā, loving-kindness, friendliness (in a deep and positive sense); this is the fundamental positive emotion. As the years go by, as I come into contact with more and more people, I see more and more clearly the importance of positive emotions in our lives, both our spiritual lives and our worldly lives. I would say that the development of positive emotions, the development of friendliness, joy, peace, faith, serenity, etc., is absolutely crucial for our development as individuals. It is, after all, our emotions that keep us going; we are not kept going by abstract ideas. It is our positive emotions that keep us going on the spiritual path, giving us inspiration, enthusiasm, and so on, until such time as we can develop Perfect Vision and be motivated by that.

So positive emotions in the fullest sense, are of particular importance within the Order and within the Movement in general. We should have strong feelings of mettā towards our own self - don't forget that - to begin with, and others; should have strong feelings of spiritual fellowship - and when I say 'strong feelings' I mean strong feelings, not something tepid and lukewarm and halfhearted and faint-hearted, but really warm; even, if you like even a little hot! And strong, not feeble. And this is one of the reasons why we have our monthly Order mettā bhāvanā, which is not some occasion on which we sit down once a month in the evening and just think about

other Order Members scattered all over the globe. It should be more than that. We sit down and we actually feel with them, and with a strong feeling of warmth and friendliness and harmony and even unity with them all. This is what the monthly mettā bhāvanā should mean, should be, And then not only mettā not only friendliness or lovingkindness, but also compassion, we should feel that too - amongst ourselves towards one another; sympathy for those in difficulties, for those who are going through a ‘difficult phase’, as we sometimes say. Nearly everybody goes through it at some time or other. Everybody has their turn, as it were; everybody has this difficult phase that they go through occasionally. So if you aren't yourself going through a difficult phase and somebody else is, be sympathetic. I mean, wisely sympathetic; I don't mean indulgent. Don't use that as an opportunity for asserting your own, relative, temporary, superiority to that sort of thing, be sympathetic; be understanding; do what you can to help; if you can't help, at least keep out of the way! And be kind. Be kind to Mitras! Be kind to Friends! Don't regard them as a nuisance with which you've somehow got landed or lumbered! After all, you were in that position once yourself. So be very kind to beginners. You know, the person who may be just coming along for the first time. He's never seen a Buddhist before. He's never seen a meditation Centre before. You know, he doesn't even know what a kesa is! He doesn't know what it means when he sees this white thing hanging round your neck. He thinks maybe it’s some sort of handkerchief! So just understand his position, be sympathetic, be kind. I mean, this is very very elementary, but I'm sorry to say that such exhortations are often necessary so let us just remember. If the newcomer comes along, be welcoming, be sympathetic, be hospitable. Speak a few words of welcome, don't go on with your informal committee meeting in the corner ignoring the newcomer. Remember what it’s like to be new.

Practise also sympathetic joy. Rejoice in the merits of other Order Members, especially those who are doing better than you are yourself; just feel pleased and happy. Don't experience feelings of competitiveness or resentment, and don't have any sort of false sense of superiority or seniority or anything like that. And then, of course, there is upekkhā, calm, equanimity, tranquillity - a very positive emotion indeed. In English, 'equanimity' or 'tranquillity' sounds so uninspiring or so uninteresting, but it isn't really like that. Equanimity, in the true sense, is based on the feeling, the experience, of equal mettā towards all. If you have this equal mettā, this equal lovingkindness, towards all, this equal sympathetic joy, this equal compassion, then, on that very stable basis, you can develop equanimity, and that will give you a wider perspective. You'll be able to survive the ups and downs that inevitably occur in connection with one's own work for the Movement; and this feeling of equanimity in the true sense, more importantly, will keep you in touch with what we have recently started calling ‘The Greater Mandala’, which circumscribes the little mandala of one's own personal interests and activities, however good and however worthy. And of course, we also need another positive emotion. We need faith and devotion, to the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha - we need inspiration.

And unless we have positive emotions in this sort of way, unless we have plenty of mettā, plenty of karunā, plenty of muditā, plenty of upekkhā, plenty of saddhā, then there won't be any real life in the Order. Positive emotion, we could say, speaking in an ordinary sort of way, leaving aside transcendental things, that positive emotion is the life blood of the Order. If there's no positive emotion in the Order, there's no life in it at all, and no life, therefore, in the Movement. So the development of positive emotion in each one of us, and in all of us in association with one another is absolutely crucial. And therefore the mettā bhāvanā as the basic positive emotion is absolutely crucial.

Questions for reflection

1. Subhuti talks about positive emotion as skilful karma. In our experience how do we know the difference between positive emotion or skilful karma and negative emotion or unskilful karma?
2. How can we experience positive emotion be a skilful karmic act, an intention, rather than a pleasant feeling which is the result of previous action? This is the difference between karma and vipāka, or fruit of previous action.
3. In your experience, what is the difference between positive and spiritual emotions? How are they connected to spiritual beauty?
4. What supports our positive emotion: in meditation and in daily life?
5. Where is our working ground in developing the brahma viharas and faith?
6. How are we getting on with practising the mettā bhāvanā?
7. How have our emotions changed since practising Buddhism?

Study area 3. Receptivity

In his original exploration of the five stages, Sangharakshita did not have much to say about receptivity. In 'A System of Meditation', he mentions it at the end of the talk. This is the extract presented below. In 'Nagarjuna's Precious Garland Seminar' he talks more about spontaneous compassionate activity as the last stage in the system. For the purposes of this retreat, it is included in the stage of spiritual rebirth. However, in 'The Purpose and Practice of Buddhist Meditation' there is a chapter on 'just sitting', which is a collation of teachings he gave about just sitting and receptivity. There is remarkably little he said about just sitting. There are two reasons for this. Firstly he felt that in the early days, that wasn't the emphasis that people needed:

"The emphasis in the past has been to get people's energies moving, to get them working, because people are in a sluggish state, mostly. Had I spoken in the early days of relaxing, this would have been the very thing that people wanted to hear, and they would have relaxed in the sense of subsiding into sloth and torpor and laziness. I can remember the days when I walked into the Pundarika Centre in Balmore Street and I had to step over the bodies of people lying around on the floor. Many of our Friends were hippies, and many people thought that drugs were the quick and easy way; you didn't have to bother to meditate. Some of the people who were lying around on the floor at the centre had been tripping earlier in the day, incredible though that may seem. When I feel that people are making an incredible effort, maybe it'll be the time to emphasize relaxation, but not before."[2]

The second reason is that he wanted the instruction to be simple and uncomplicated by conceptualisation. Just sit. Subhuti went into a lot more detail on this stage and talked about it as moving from a willed effort to a responsiveness to what moves us. He emphasises the importance of being alive to whatever inspires us, to notice where we respond to the world as a whole. This process of 'Dharmic responsiveness' moves us into the stream of the Dharma itself.

From 'A System of Meditation', 1978

What about the Just Sitting practice? Well, what about it? It's difficult to say anything about it, because when one Just Sits, well, one just sits! But at least one can say that there is a time when one just sits. And times, also, when one does not just sit; times, that is to say, when one is doing other things. And one of the times when one does not just sit is when one is practising other meditations; that is to say, meditations other than Just Sitting. (If, of course Just Sitting can be described as a meditation practice.) That is to say, when one is practising other meditations such as the

[2] Sangharakshita, *The Purpose and Practice of Buddhist Meditation*

mindfulness of breathing, the mettā bhāvanā, the recollection of elements and so on. And in all of these other meditations conscious effort is required. But, one must be careful that this conscious effort does not become too willed, even too will-full, and in order to counteract this tendency, in order to guard against this possibility, we can practise Just Sitting. In other words, practice just sitting in between the other methods, so that there is a period of activity, during which you are practising say, the mindfulness of breathing or the mettā bhāvanā, and then a period of receptivity. Then a period of passivity; a period of activity. So in this way we go on. Passivity; activity. Activity; passivity. Passivity; activity. Activity; passivity. In this way we go on. Mindfulness - Just Sitting. Mettā - Just Sitting. Recollection of the Elements - Just Sitting. Visualisation - Just Sitting. In this way we can go on all the time, having a perfect rhythm as it were, and achieving in this way a perfectly balanced practice, taking hold of; letting go. Taking hold of; letting go. Grasping; opening up. Grasping; opening up. Action; non-action. In this way we achieve a perfectly balanced practice of meditation, a perfectly balanced spiritual life, and in this way the whole system of meditation becomes complete.

The Five Aspects of Sangharakshita's System of Dharma Life

Subhuti, 2013. Edited by Vidyaruci.

Up until now I've been stressing willed effort. I've talked about the imbalance that emerges between what you are now and what you would like to be, and the exercise of your will to work against the natural course of instinct and reaction, deliberately preventing yourself from behaving in certain ways, and inducing yourself to behave in certain other ways. This is extremely important and I hope I have sufficiently emphasized that.

In integration, you are identifying more and more clearly your moral agency and exercising it more and more consciously. In positive emotion you are directing that agency to shape your volitions so that they are more and more skilful. If you keep on exercising karma in this sort of way, the consequence is that you are re-created, you emerge as a different person. Your new consciousness is more refined and subtle, more able to encompass the deep mystery of things, to see the nuance, the intricacy and complexity – and indeed the simplicity – beneath the surface of things. This happens naturally; your mind just emerges that way. In practising the Dharma it is very important to understand that you don't make something happen, you set up the conditions in dependence upon which it will happen. This mysterious principle holds true at all levels of the path: something emerges *from* what you are now that is *more* than what you are now. In its highest application, you do not *create* Enlightenment, you set up the conditions in dependence upon which it arises. And on a lower level, you work karmically to establish certain conditions, out of which a new you arises, which is beyond what you were before. You may have had the experience of coming

off a retreat, particularly a meditation retreat, and not realising how changed you are until you return to your normal life and things seem different to you. They seem different because *you* are different, perceiving with different eyes. You are more positive, have more energy, are more naturally skilful, more empathically engaged with others; you are clearer, because less clouded by your own subjective confusions; you are more integrated and therefore happier and more fulfilled. Even with just a small amount of karmic effort one can expect to experience a bit of this. It is interesting to watch the fluctuations in your experience, dependent upon making an effort or not making an effort. When you have a moral holiday, so to speak, you can see the change in your consciousness. And when you do make an effort, especially over a period of time such as on a meditation retreat, or in other periods of your life when you are able to practise in a consistent way, you see the new you emerging.

The most important feature of this new you is that it is more whole. As you make karmic effort more intensively, and over a longer period of time, your life begins to flow together, and everything seems to be part of a single unity. The different aspects and functions of you are much more in harmony and even may not appear as separate. Head and heart are not merely in contact with one another, but seem to be united as if they are one thing: feeling is thought, thought is feeling; feeling is intelligent, and thought feelingful. You increasingly experience yourself as a whole, and respond to the world around you as a whole. Instead of willing, you increasingly find yourself responding. There is less need to force yourself in a direction that some of your energies don't want to go, and you simply respond to the values that you see around you. A new faculty gradually begins to take over within you, a faculty that is neither thinking nor feeling, but both of them unified and transcended. We have within us the capacity for this sort of responsiveness to value, and that capacity emerges more and more fully as we cultivate skilful action. It becomes not merely something we experience sometimes, but something we are.

Initially, we are likely to experience this faculty coming to life in certain situations. For example, in relation to the beauty of nature, you don't *think* about it, you just naturally respond to the sunlight filtered through the trees, to the cobwebs bedecked with dew in the mornings. Or in true friendship, you are drawn to and take delight in the qualities of your friend. Or one can respond to the truth of the Dharma – I remember when I first read something of Buddhism, in Conze's *Buddhist Scriptures*, I didn't think, 'this is the truth'; I just *knew* it was the truth, and I responded. Or in witnessing nobility of action, when you see somebody doing something which is genuinely noble or self-sacrificing. In this connection I once read an article about a plane crash, which included an eye-witness description of the scramble to rescue people as the plane began to sink. It described one man who'd brought out several people from the fuselage, and kept on going back and back; even after the plane sank he still dived down, but he didn't come up. I was moved even to tears by the intense feeling of admiration at that nobility of sacrifice.

Our response to art can reveal this faculty. Perhaps you have had the experience of seeing a really good film, for example, and finding that something in you is stirred, and the images remain with you and seem to point to something further, something higher. That kind of responsiveness is not thought, although it is intelligent. It is not a mere emotion, if you like, although it is richly felt. It is not active, although it is freely moving. It is not passive, although it is open and receptive. It is hard to find the right words to describe it.

It is interesting that we no longer have a ready word for this kind of responsiveness. You could call faith, but in the Buddhist context faith means *sraddha*, which is so much a specialized term for a responsiveness to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha that perhaps it doesn't capture the full flavour of what I am talking about. In earlier English usage, up until the 19th Century, the word one might have used is 'intellect', such as in Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty'. He doesn't mean beauty of concept, although it doesn't exclude that; he means this whole responsiveness, which, of course, for the Romantics was summed up in the word 'imagination'. There has been some discussion amongst people who think in this sort of area. Henri Corbin for instance, the French savant, and a very important figure in the re-creation of imagination in Western culture, talks about the way in which our modern culture has lost the middle ground between experience and intelligence or intellect. It has lost that faculty that perceives beauty and truth, which does not deny sense experience or intellect, but fulfils and transcends them both.

We could call it 'Love' even, if we want to refer to our own European tradition - a great tradition, although that term gets so perverted. It's not ordinary metta, not the deliberate effort to bring about skilful volition, which would come under the category of positive emotion; but when metta becomes something spontaneous and natural, when positive emotion really flows, it becomes more like Love in the classic sense. It's a strong attraction, you could say an erotic power. I don't mean erotic in the merely sexual sense, but in an older sense of a powerful attraction of the whole of your being. It's a sort of magnetic power, like that of being drawn to a beautiful sunset. In the neo-Platonic tradition, Eros is the power that draws you to the highest truth, that engages you with the deepest reality. Eros is the whole psyche responding, a magnetic power which surges through us and drives us into a relationship with whatever it is drawn to.

Faith is, in Buddhism, its most characteristic mode, faith which is that deep responsiveness to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, to the embodiments of the ideal: what Bhante calls 'the response of what is ultimate in us to what is ultimate in the universe'. Something ultimate in us, which is not to do with our own will, is drawn to something that can never adequately be put into words. It can be embodied, it can be illustrated, but it can never be defined.

When we break free of ego-clinging, that capacity to respond to the Dharma becomes prajna. It is first of all experienced as a responsiveness to mundane value in the sense of good qualities - beauty, nobility and so on; it becomes faith when it begins to be attracted to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha; and it fulfils itself in prajna. Our ordinary responsiveness is a pre-figuration of faith, and faith is a pre-figuration of prajna. So this capacity is the vehicle of the Dharma life, heard first as an echo of the Dharma – though perhaps not recognized as such – when we recognize values, but we don't see the deeper levels of them. First of all, it is a responsiveness to quality, to value in the universe around us in a quite ordinary way. Everybody has some twinges of it, but if you base your life more and more upon that responsiveness, it gradually emerges into a quest for value on higher and higher levels, ultimately on the highest level possible which is found in the Dharma, in the Buddha as the embodiment of the Dharma, and in the communication within the Sangha. It is a feeling for something better, for something more, something deeply true, deeply fulfilling. Eventually that quality becomes spontaneous, it becomes what we are: we become responsiveness itself. That, if you like, is stream entry: the point at which we cannot but respond to value, at which value is all we are interested in, and we see it wherever it is. This is the significance of Vairocana; his wisdom is the wisdom of the Jnanadhatu, the sphere of the Dharma. He is that responsiveness; he is quivering all the time to the truth in everything.

To begin with, it is not reliable. It comes, it goes, we have it, we don't have it. Sometimes you get a strong sense of that kind of wholeness, and then it goes, and if you are at all aware of what has happened you feel its loss. 'Rarely, rarely comest thou, spirit of delight', was Shelley giving expression to the experience of losing inspiration, and the pain of that loss.

But that sort of responsiveness is present in everybody's life to some extent, unless they really do coarsen their sensibilities. The modern world encourages such a coarsening, and sometimes you might realize in conversation with people that they have no inkling of it, even on an ordinary level, so in order to communicate with them you have to seek their point of departure, as it were. I think one of the arts of communication is finding where the erotic is alive for people, where they have that sort of responsiveness. It may not be anything very exalted – no Buddha's and Bodhisattvas descending; but it can be quite surprising to suddenly find yourself in communication with them because you have found where the life is, that spontaneous responsiveness.

Probably the strongest experience that most people have of it in their lives is when they fall in love. That can be very useful for experiencing the erotic, particularly when he or she isn't interested in you. When you fall in love you experience this erotic charge, which of course has got a dimension to it of sexual craving and a neurotic desire for affection and so forth, but there is often something more. The problem is that, decent and lovable though he or she may be, they are actually just an ordinary

human being. Eros turns them into something, or, to put it another way, through them Eros comes to life for us. But that is so strongly connected with another human being, and that other human being is so strongly connected with an animal function and a whole social context, that the love never really gets a chance to go beyond itself - unless you're so fortunate as to be turned down again and again and again! This faculty is present in all our lives, and it is important to identify it, and then we need to train it. This, however, is no easy matter. In a way the karmic work is the easy side of it, because then you can use will. Through the basic work of making effort to develop our minds we become more whole and less selfish. Then, we can respond, and allow that responsiveness to become more and more part of us, more and more what we are. Even though it's a responsiveness and not a willed effort, nonetheless we need to make a willed effort to allow it to arise. But we also need to make sure that in our lives there is a deliberate cultivation of that responsiveness, and not just by willing the development of skilful states.

I think probably the most important way to start with this is just by identifying it in your experience. If you don't do this early in your spiritual life it will be difficult to bring it in later, and the danger if you neglect it is that you will create a Dharma life for yourself, but it will be slightly apart from your inspiration. A friend of mine once told me that when he looked back on his life, it seemed to him that he had initially had some inspiration for the Dharma which formed a foundation, and then he built the edifice of his Dharma life next door to it. Should that happen you will then have to knock down your Dharma life, Milarepa like, and re-erect it on a new basis. To some extent this is probably inevitable, because you have to make willed effort, and it is very skilled work to keep that willed effort related to the fundamental foundation of your initial inspiration, which is what really gives you delight and gets your energy moving.

For most people one of the practices that is most helpful for developing this sort of responsiveness is doing nothing. I remember Bhante relating something that he had written about one of his visits to India. He had been leading a retreat, and while the retreat was going on in another building, Bhante sat in his hut looking out into the blue sky, and he said something like, 'I was doing nothing, absolutely nothing. When I say I was doing nothing, I mean, I was doing nothing. So when most people talk about doing nothing, they actually mean sitting day-dreaming, or planning or fiddling about or whatever. I was doing *nothing'*. Doing nothing is very difficult. It is difficult because the mind drifts, and also because boredom sets in. Though boredom is not in any of the lists of the Adbhidharma, I nonetheless think it can be a very positive mental state, and is often the key to finding that deeper responsiveness. Cultivate boredom: when you experience boredom, you are contacting the lack of that responsiveness, and it is when you experience it as lacking, that there is the possibility of it arising.

I think the cultivation of ‘nothing’ is extremely important. Most people hardly allow themselves a moment of rest. Even when they are resting they are scanning a newspaper, or nowadays tapping at their phones, or just daydreaming. But to sit doing nothing is a very difficult practice indeed. It can be humiliating, because for a start you realise how empty you are. That’s good, because if you can find yourself empty, you can start to fill from within; but if you immediately try to fill yourself from without, you deaden any inner quickening. So you need to leave a space, and often that means a space of boredom. Avoid distraction: don’t let your mind go questing for something to engage with, just remain open, watching, waiting, seeing what arises, seeing what doesn’t arise, not judging what’s going on, just sitting. Of course, ‘Just Sitting’ is the name of the meditation practice that is intended to develop this. In some ways I think the best way to do the just sitting practice is in an armchair, because when you sit on the ground with your legs crossed in meditation posture you can still have the attitude that you are doing something. But when you are just sitting in your chair and there’s nothing else going on, the next event hasn’t started, and the previous event is over, and you just sit there - that can be the most powerful form of just sitting.

‘Just sitting’ is really just that. Sangharakshita always resisted saying much about it. He used to just say two things that I remember. One was, ‘don’t try to do anything, don’t try not to do anything’. Or he’d say ‘when we just sit, we just sit’. Nowadays there is a body of teaching growing around the just sitting practice, including from me, but in some ways I rather regret this, because such teachings can start filling that sense of complete openness, in which, in a way, you don’t know what you’re doing, because you’re not doing anything: there are no rules, there are no guidelines, you are just sitting. I think that the rather puzzling challenge to the will is the very point of this practice, and that it’s a pity if one introduces too much of an idea of what one is doing. As much as possible it is better to just leave an open space. Let that space open and sit in it, and something will arise.

You’ll probably find at times a kind of humiliation. To be dedicated to the Dharma, for the Dharma to be what one’s whole life is about, and yet to find one’s mind to be so dominated by trivia, can be extremely disillusioning. But if you stay with that boredom, that humiliation, I guarantee that something will flow: maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but eventually, before too long, something will start to flow. So, I think it’s really important to cultivate this conscious practice of letting a space be. Try just sitting in the garden; look at the flowers, look at the clouds, but don’t try to get something from them, or apply explanations to what you see. Just look, almost without deliberation, and see what happens. If you create that sort of space in your life, problems with wilfulness will disappear, because everything you do will emerge from that openness, that lack of effort.

In a very seminal discussion, Sangharakshita referred to the ‘sphere of uselessness’. All our useful activity needs to be contained in a sphere of uselessness. Mystery is

the essence of this state, staying with this sense of a mysterious depth, a lack of closedness, a lack of clarity – not an *un*clarity, but a conceptual ambiguity. The essence of spiritual receptivity is this openness to mystery, to possibility, to the unknown, to something new and unrecognized, which emerges from within you, or descends upon you from without, depending on your metaphorical point of view. So, having identified it in your ordinary experience and therefore encouraged yourself to take it further, just do nothing, just sit, whether on your cushion, or in your armchair, laying in your bed (as long as you don't go to sleep). Just sit, just lie, just stand, just gaze, whatever. Before you meditate, before you apply willed effort, just sit; after you've applied willed effort, just sit, so that you have an opportunity for what you've gained from that effort to resonate within you, otherwise you jump up from the cushion and the effect is lost in the activity of the day. Surrounding everything with space, this is the essence of the practice of spiritual receptivity.

In other contexts too, we can develop this faculty. In friendship in which there is a communication that carries you beyond yourselves in a meeting beyond personalities, beyond words, where you feel deeply in contact with each other and are taking delight that. It can be characterized by those instants in friendship when you fall into companionable silence, not because you are lost in your separate thoughts, but because you are immersed together in some sort of experience that has come to life between you. One can experience it during an inspired study session, when your engagement with a text takes you outside yourself and you almost *become* something of the Dharma. The experience of Sangha can be like that too. When the Order meets in large numbers there can be a point at which you sense that we are all united in something, a mood or atmosphere that emerges from us, and which we are all merged in, at least for periods of time. A friend of mine coined the term 'Sanghakaya', the body of sangha, to describe this experience of the sangha as something tangible.

We need consciously to cultivate this natural responsiveness as it emerges more and more fully. We need deliberately to identify it, to give the space for it by sitting doing nothing, and engaging in those activities that we have found do bring it to life for us. As it becomes fuller and more part of you, it increasingly informs other aspects of your Dharma life. The experience of effort in integration becomes increasingly focused in it, so that your integration takes place around that faculty, that responsiveness. You could say that Going For Refuge *is* that responsiveness, and as your experience of integration deepens, you'll experience more and more of that wholeness in the practices that are especially recommended for integration. So, for instance, in mindfulness of breathing, your awareness of the breath will pass from your *idea* of the breath – from the breath as conceptually mediated - to your direct experience of the sensations of breathing, and from that to your experience of the subtle, aesthetic qualities of those sensations. And that carries you over the threshold, through neighbourhood concentration, and into jhana.

Jhana is that faculty of responsiveness functioning now independently of the bifurcation of ordinary sensory embodiment; so the experience of jhana in meditation, though still mundane, is the experience of a new wholeness, and this is why it is so much stressed. What I'm trying to do here is enlarge the notion of what that wholeness means, so it's not simply confined to jhana in meditation, important as that is. You need to be experiencing and cultivating that wholeness in other areas of your life, especially because of the nature of our very complex and also rich cultural heritage. As you integrate yourself more and more around this faculty of responsiveness, you will experience in meditation more and more of jhana, or at least come closer and closer to it, you will find yourself hovering on that threshold, which is the threshold of the different aspects of you, the different streams, uniting. Similarly, when you are practising positive emotion, increasingly you will be experiencing an erotic desire for others' wellbeing, rather than a mere wish for it. When you try to practice metta bhavana, to begin with you are willing yourself to wish well to others, but when you really enter into metta, it is quite spontaneous, it flows, and it is whole.

It is this faculty of responsiveness that lifts us above the animal life of consumption and attachment. It lifts us above the ordinary life of birth, education, work, marriage, retirement, death. It lifts us above that into a realm of wholeness in which we can connect with deep meaning. And we need to encourage its emergence more and more vividly in our own lives. It is what this whole Dharma life is based upon. Everything we are trying to do in our Dharma practice can only happen if this begins to emerge. You cannot perceive the Dharma if you don't have this wholeness. You'll think about the Dharma, and understand it intellectually, but you won't experience it. But when this whole responsiveness emerges, you'll be able to really enter the stream of the Dharma - indeed, this *is* the stream of the Dharma. At first, it first begins to emerge in your experience there is only a hint of something more, of something transcendent. But the more it emerges, the more consciously it is evoked, the more it becomes a living part of you, the more *dharma-niyama* processes are beginning to influence you, and eventually you enter the stream of the Dharma, which *is* that flow. When it is sufficiently highly developed, it just responds; when you enter the stream you don't have to make an effort – you can paddle a bit faster, but whether you paddle or not, you are going to move with the stream. Then our practice in relation to it is essentially to get out of its way so that it can spontaneously respond, and we let that stream of the Dharma carry us in its strong erotic attraction to Buddhahood.

Questions for reflection

1. What is the difference between willed, conscious effort and responding or receptivity? Have you had times in your life when you have had to ‘take hold’, and times when you have had to ‘let go’?
2. In your experience what does receptivity or Dharmic responsiveness feel like? How would we describe it?
3. Where do we experience this responsiveness? What conditions bring us alive in a way that doesn’t need conscious willed effort?
4. How do we experience responsiveness or receptivity in all areas of our life: meditation and communication in particular?
5. How can we apply receptivity or responsiveness to the other stages of the system of practice?

Study area 4. Spiritual Death

From ‘Nagarjuna’s Precious Garland Seminar’, 1976

Extract from ‘The Purpose and Practice of Buddhist Meditation’ p44

The third stage is the stage of vision. One sees the truth – not, of course, regarding truth as a thing ‘out there’ to be seen like an ordinary object. This is the stage of openness to truth. Guenther talks in terms of the dimension of openness of Being with a capital B, by which he means śūnyatā; though his phrase is a bit roundabout, it’s quite expressive.[3]

This is the stage of openness in the direction of ultimate reality, not holding back on the process of expansion; not opening up so far but then refusing to open up any further. It’s indefinite openness to the ultimate or, in terms of sight, a vision of reality, a vision of truth. This is also the stage of death – spiritual death, the death of the old self, the death of the ego however much refined, and the birth of, if you like, the seed of Buddhahood. In a sense that seed was there already, but it has now become visible, and from it the new being, the Buddha, will eventually develop. When you see the truth you die, as it were; or perhaps one could say that when you die, you see the truth. Among meditation practices this is covered by the six element practice and the meditation on śūnyatā. Again, you don’t meditate on śūnyatā as though it were a thing ‘out there’ on which you are meditating. That would just be an idea, a concept, a vague image of śūnyatā, not śūnyatā itself. So that’s the stage of vision, or reality, or death, or spiritual rebirth – whatever you like to call it.

From ‘A System of Meditation’, 1978

Extract from ‘The Purpose and Practice of Buddhist Meditation’ p53

But suppose you have developed mindfulness, and suppose you have developed all these positive emotions, suppose you are a very aware, positive, responsible person, even a true individual, at least psychologically speaking, then what is the next step? The next step is death. The happy, healthy individual which you now are – or were – must die. In other words, the subject–object distinction itself must be transcended; the mundane individuality, pure and perfect though it may be, must be broken up. Here the key practice is the recollection of the six elements. (The six elements are earth, water, fire, air, ether or space, and consciousness.)

There are other practices also which help us to break up our present individuality, however positive and aware it has become: the recollection of impermanence, the recollection of death, and the śūnyatā meditations, including the meditation on the

[3] Herbert V. Guenther, The Tantric View of Life, Shambhala Publications, Berkeley and London 1972, p. 150

nidāna chain. But the śūnyatā meditations can become rather abstract, not to say intellectual. The recollection of the six elements – involving the giving back of the earth, water, fire, etc. elements in us to the earth, water, fire etc. elements in the universe, relinquishing in turn earth, water, fire, air, space, even our individualized consciousness – is the most concrete and most practical way of practising at this particular stage. This is the key practice for breaking up our sense of relative individuality.

We can even say that the six element practice is itself a śūnyatā meditation, because it helps us to realize the voidness of our own mundane individuality – it helps us to die. There are many translations for the word śūnyatā. Sometimes it is translated 'voidness', sometimes 'relativity'; H. V. Guenther renders it 'nothingness'.[4] But śūnyatā could well be rendered 'death', because it is the 'death of everything conditioned'. It is only when the conditioned individuality dies that the unconditioned individuality – as we can call it – begins to emerge. In meditation, as we go deeper and deeper, we often experience a great fear. Sometimes people shy away from this fear, but it is good to allow oneself to experience it. The fear occurs when we feel what may be called the touch of śūnyatā, the touch of reality, on the conditioned self. The touch of śūnyatā feels like death. In fact, for the conditioned self it is death. So the conditioned self feels – we feel – afraid. The recollection of the six elements and the other śūnyatā meditations are vipaśyanā (Pāli vipassanā) or insight meditations, whereas the mindfulness of breathing and the mettā bhāvanā are śamatha (Pāli samatha) or pacification-type meditations. Śamatha develops and refines our conditioned individuality, but vipaśyanā breaks down that individuality, or rather it enables us to see right through it.

Questions for reflection

1. How do we envision spiritual death: 'not holding back on the process of expansion', 'transcending the subject/object duality', 'breaking up of mundane individuality' or 'death of conditioned individuality', or in other ways? What dies?
2. How can we recognise our 'conditioned individuality' in action, and in ways do we get a sense of 'unconditioned individuality' emerging? One way is through seeing the ways in which we respond to situations - do we react or create? If we react, what fixed view or sense of self are we protecting?
3. Where do we experience fear in the Dharma life?
4. What conditions do we need to bring spiritual death about? How can we be more open to the truth?
5. How do we experience spiritual death?

[4] ibid

Study area 5. Spiritual Rebirth

From ‘Nagarjuna’s Precious Garland Seminar’, 1976

Extract from ‘The Purpose and Practice of Buddhist Meditation’

Then comes the stage of transformation, when the vision that you have seen or your experience of reality starts, as it were, descending and transforming every aspect of your being. It is not just in the head, not even in your spiritual being; it pervades all parts of your being, all parts of, as it were, your spiritual body. This is also a stage of meditation – not the meditation with the help of which you gain that initial visionary experience but the meditation that you practise after it. In this stage, the practice of meditation is dwelling on that visionary experience, that glimpse of reality, so as to deepen and broaden it and bring it down, as it were, so that it pervades and transforms all the different aspects of one’s being.

And fifth and lastly, there’s what we may call the stage of compassionate activity. Having completely transformed oneself in accordance with one’s vision of reality, one is in a position really to help others. This is also the stage of true spontaneity. You don’t think about what you’re going to do to help others – at least not in the ordinary way. You just spontaneously function, you do what needs to be done. There’s a sort of overflow of your Enlightened being.

From ‘A System of Meditation’, 1978

Extract from ‘The Purpose and Practice of Buddhist Meditation’

When the mundane self has died, what happens next? In not very traditional language, out of the experience of the death of the mundane self the transcendental self arises. The transcendental self arises in the midst of the sky – in the midst of the Void – where we see a lotus flower. On the lotus flower there is a seed in the form of a letter. This letter is what we call a bīja mantra. This bīja mantra is transformed into a particular Buddha or Bodhisattva figure. Here, obviously, we have come on to the visualization practices.

The visualized figure before you, the figure of a Buddha or Bodhisattva, sublime and glorious though it may be, is, in fact, you: is the new you – you as you will be if only you allow yourself to die. When we do the full visualization practice, at least in certain forms, we recite and meditate first of all upon the śūnyatā mantra: oṃ svabhāvaśuddhāḥ sarvadharmāḥ svabhāva-śuddho ’haṃ, which means ‘all things are pure by nature; I too am pure by nature’. Here ‘pure’ means pure of all concepts, pure of all conditionality, because we cannot be reborn without passing through death. To be a little elliptical, there is no Vajrayāna without Mahāyāna, and Mahāyāna is the yāna of śūnyatā, the experience of śūnyatā. This is why my old

friend and teacher, Mr C. M. Chen, the Chan hermit in Kalimpong, used to say, 'Without the realization of śūnyatā, the visualizations of the Vajrayāna are only vulgar magic.'[5]

There are many different kinds of visualization practice; there are many different levels of practice; there are many different Buddhas, bodhisattvas, ḍākas, ḍākinīs, and dharmapālas that one can visualize. But the general significance of visualization practice comes out with particular clarity in the Vajrasattva sādhana. Vajrasattva is a Buddha appearing in bodhisattva form. He is white in colour: white for purification. Here the purification consists in the realization that in the ultimate sense you have never become impure: you are pure from the beginning, pure from the beginningless beginning, pure by nature, pure essentially; in the depths of your being you are pure of all conditionality, or rather you are pure of the very distinction between conditioned and Unconditioned. This sort of statement must surely come as a great revelation – a great, positive shock.

Vajrasattva is also associated with death: not only with spiritual death, but also with physical death. There is a connection here with the Tibetan Book of the Dead. In Tibetan, the (so-called) 'Book of the Dead' is called Bardo Thödol, which means 'liberation by hearing in the intermediate state' (that is to say, by hearing the instruction of the lama seated by your erstwhile body and explaining to you what is happening to you in the intermediate state after your death). The intermediate state is intermediate between physical death and physical rebirth.

But meditation itself is also an intermediate state, because when we meditate – in the true sense – we die. In the same way, physical death is a meditative state, a state of enforced meditation, enforced samādhi. In both intermediate states – the one between death and rebirth and the one which occurs in meditation – we can see Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, even mandalas of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

These are not outside us; they are the manifestation of our own true mind, the manifestation of the dharmakāya, and we can, as it were, identify with them and thus be spiritually reborn – reborn, as it were, in a transcendental mode of existence. If we do not succeed in identifying in this way, then we are simply reborn in the ordinary sense – we fall back into the old conditioned self.

[5] For a version of Mr Chen's statement, see C. M. Chen, Buddhist Meditation, Systematic and Practical, published by Dr Yutang Lin, El Cerrito 1989, p. 190.

Questions for reflection

1. How do we envision spiritual rebirth: ‘dwelling on a glimpse of reality, so that it pervades and transforms all the different aspects of one’s being’, spontaneous compassionate activity, or visualization of a Buddha or Bodhisattva?
2. What is our experience of spiritual rebirth?
3. What are our limits of transformation? What do we want to leave out of the process of transformation?
4. How do we develop our connection with the transcendental self? This could be through dwelling on our own experiences of dwelling on a glimpse of reality, dwelling on Buddha or Bodhisattva figures, the life of the Buddha or lives of Buddhist practitioners.
5. How do we know we are experiencing spiritual rebirth and not positive emotion?
6. What is the difference between ‘true spontaneity’ and ‘ordinary spontaneity’ or even ‘authenticity’?

Study area 6. Bringing The Aspects Together

From ‘Nagarjuna’s Precious Garland Seminar’, 1976

Extract from ‘The Purpose and Practice of Buddhist Meditation’

These five stages form a series, and if one traverses them, one traverses the whole spiritual path. But there is a path of regular steps and there is also a path of irregular steps. You could conceivably start work on the first stage, the stage of mindfulness and integration, complete that and then go on to the next stage, that of positive emotion, complete that and then go on to the third stage, and so on. But I think very few people would function in this way. Most people, for some time at least, will have to follow the path of irregular steps, working now on one and now on another of these stages. One could even go so far as to say that one can think in terms of working on all five stages simultaneously. The first would be perfected first, the second would be perfected second, and so on – that’s where the path of regular steps comes in. You can work on all of them simultaneously so that the first becomes perfected and then you are just working on four; the second becomes perfected and you’re just working on three; the third becomes perfected and then you are just working on four; the second becomes perfected and you’re just working on three; the third becomes perfected and you’re just working on two; the fourth becomes perfected and you’re working on one; the fifth becomes perfected, and you’re perfected then.

What does this mean? It means that all the time, every day, you have got five things to practise as best you can. You keep up the effort to be mindful and aware, and to be as together as possible, as integrated as possible. You remain in as positive a mental state as you possibly can. You don’t lose sight of your ultimate goal at any time. You try to practise at every level whatever you’ve realized or discovered or seen on the highest level of your being. And you do what you can to help people. This is your spiritual life and this is your spiritual practice. These are the things with which you are basically concerned. You can forget about all the other formulations, all about the four noble truths and the Eightfold Path. On the practical side, this is all that you really need to think in terms of. Whatever has been said by all the different Buddhist teachers in the course of hundreds of years of development is contained in this, in principle. Whatever they’ve had to say about the different stages of the path – as I said, you can get some very elaborate descriptions indeed, which may confuse you or even mislead you – this is basically what it’s all about.

You can also think of these five stages in terms of the five spiritual faculties. The first stage corresponds to the faculty of mindfulness, the second to the faculty of faith, the third to the faculty of wisdom, the fourth to the faculty of meditation, and the fifth to the faculty of vīrya. If you want to think of any particular Buddhist virtue and understand its place in the total scheme of things, you can allocate it to one of these

five stages. For instance, where does dāna, generosity, come in? It clearly comes in stage two, because when you're overflowing with love and joy, your natural tendency is to give; you can't help it. You're giving yourself all the time, you're flowing out all the time. Perhaps I need not multiply examples. Just think in terms of these five principal stages. These are the aspects of the spiritual path that you will be cultivating all the time. If you just try to do these five things, you can forget all about making progress or where exactly you are along the path. Just intensify your effort in those five directions all the time – then you simply can't go wrong.

You may notice that stages three and four correspond to the path of vision and the path of transformation as described in connection with the Eightfold Path, but unless you've got a scholarly mind you need not worry too much about these sorts of connections. Just get a sense of this general understanding of the path, and don't worry if the traditional descriptions don't seem to square very closely with your own experience or your own needs.

From 'A System of Meditation', 1978

Extract from 'The Purpose and Practice of Buddhist Meditation'

I hope that we can now begin to see the whole system of meditation, at least in outline. There are four great stages, which I will briefly recapitulate. The first is the stage of integration. That is the first thing you must do in connection with meditation. Integration is achieved mainly through practice of the mindfulness of breathing, as well as with the help of mindfulness and awareness in general. Here, in this stage, we develop an integrated self.

The second stage is the stage of emotional positivity. This is achieved mainly through the development of mettā, karuṇā, muditā, and so on. Here the integrated self is raised to a higher, more refined, at the same time more powerful level, symbolized by the beautiful blooming white lotus flower.

Then there is the third stage: spiritual death, achieved mainly through the recollection of the six elements, but also through the recollection of impermanence, the recollection of death, and the śūnyatā meditations. Here the refined self is seen through, and we experience the Void, experience śūnyatā, experience spiritual death.

And then, fourthly, there is the stage of spiritual rebirth. This is achieved through the visualization and mantra recitation practice. Abstract visualization (the visualization of geometric forms and letters) also helps. This, in broad outline, is the system of meditation.

Questions for Reflection

1. How has the system of practice helped you understand your own Dharma life?
2. Which aspects do you find easier than others, and what needs a bit more attention?
3. Have you seen the different stages working in your life as a whole - have you noticed a progression or a connection between them?
4. Are there any precepts you want to take up in your practice as you integrate this material into your daily life?