

Sangharakshita as Buddhist Modernist

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ABSTRACT

In an essay originally commissioned for an edited volume on ‘Buddhism in Europe’, I present Sangharakshita’s formation as a Buddhist, as the founder of FWBO/Triratna, and as a teacher of Buddhism in the modern world. I particularly investigate to what degree Sangharakshita’s teaching can be considered a form of ‘Buddhist modernism’, to use a term drawn from Buddhist studies scholarship, adapting and transforming traditional Asian Buddhism in ways suited to modernity. I conclude that, while Sangharakshita can certainly be considered a Buddhist modernist, his teaching is nevertheless *sui generis*.

INTRODUCTION

Urgyen Sangharakshita was an Englishman, born Denis Lingwood in London in 1925, who lived as a Buddhist monk in India for twenty years before returning to the UK and founding the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) in 1967. This new Buddhist movement, renamed the Triratna Buddhist Community in 2010, has enjoyed steady growth since that time. There are now [2022] more than 2,300 members of the Triratna Buddhist Order, and more than 150 Buddhist centres and groups around the world, where many thousands of mitras (those who have formally joined the Community) and friends (those with an informal connection) meet to study and practise the Dharma, the Buddha’s teaching. Sangharakshita died in 2018, aged 93, meeting with disciples and friends until the end. His distinctive formulation of the Dharma remains central to Triratna Buddhism, and its institutions and

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structure reflect his radical reformation of traditional Buddhism for the modern world.²

In this essay, I reflect on Sangharakshita as a Buddhist and Buddhist teacher, identifying his teaching as a unique expression of Buddhist modernism.³ The phrase ‘Buddhist modernism’ is a term used in contemporary scholarship to describe the reinterpretation of Buddhism, starting in Asian Buddhist countries, as a system of thought that meets the needs of modernity.⁴ David McMahan clarifies how Buddhist modernism does not just mean all Buddhism that happens to exist in the modern era; rather, it refers to ‘forms of Buddhism that have emerged out of an engagement with dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity’ (2009: 6). Although expressions of Buddhist modernism are diverse and sometimes contradictory, it is possible to identify some key components: (1) the demythologization of traditional Buddhist cosmology, to bring Buddhism into dialogue with the scientific worldview; (2) an activist emphasis on social engagement; and (3) the popularisation of meditation for lay people as well as monastics.⁵

While Sangharakshita’s writings and teachings can undoubtedly be categorised as expressions of Buddhist modernism, they are in many ways *sui generis*.⁶ For instance, Sangharakshita has identified Going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as the central and unifying act of a Buddhist, and on this basis has drawn from the main Buddhist traditions – mainstream, Mahāyāna and Tantric – to create an ecumenical yet distinctive presentation of Buddhism for the modern world. In this essay I identify some defining features of Sangharakshita’s teaching in the context of his life and the creative

² The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order/Triiratna Buddhist Community has not been the subject of much academic study, but see Bluck (2006: 152–178) for an overview of FWBO in Britain, and Vajragupta (2010) for an insider’s view of the history of FWBO/Triiratna.

³ I take this opportunity to disclose that I write as an active member of the Triiratna Buddhist Order of which Sangharakshita is the founder, and should therefore be considered as an ‘insider’ in this tradition.

⁴ The term ‘Buddhist modernism’ was coined by Heinz Bechert (1966); its meaning and significance is developed in Bechert (1986), Bechert (1995), McMahan (2009), McMahan (2012).

⁵ These and other components of Buddhist modernism are summarised here from McMahan (2009: 7), who draws on Bechert (1995: 254–6).

⁶ There are useful overviews of Sangharakshita’s distinctively modernist approach in Baumann (1996: 357–61) and Baumann (2012: 127–9), in which he draws attention to the parallels between the teaching of Sangharakshita and his friend Lama Anagarika Govinda, also the founder of a western Buddhist movement (the Ārya Maitreya Maṇḍala), which however has attracted fewer members than Triiratna.

development of his thinking, as expressions of a distinctive and indeed unique presentation of the Dharma for the modern world.

BECOMING A BUDDHIST

Sangharakshita's conversion to Buddhism was entirely through reading. In his memoir *The Rainbow Road*, written in the 1950s while he was in India, Sangharakshita recounts how, as a teenager, he first read Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* and realised that he was not a Christian, and then read the *Diamond Sūtra* and realised that he was a Buddhist:

Though this book epitomizes a teaching of such rarefied sublimity that even *arahants*, saints who have attained individual Nirvāṇa, are said to become confused and afraid when they hear it for the first time, I at once joyfully embraced it with an unqualified acceptance and assent. To me the *Diamond Sūtra* was not new. I had known it and believed it and realized it ages before and the reading of the *Sūtra* as it were awoke me to the existence of something I had forgotten. Once I realised that I was a Buddhist it seemed that I had always been one, that it was the most natural thing in the world to be, and I had never been anything else. (Sangharakshita, 2017: 85)⁷

This story tells us several important things about Sangharakshita. Firstly, he had a precocious mind. His conversion was in 1942, when he was sixteen or seventeen. Due to a childhood illness, he had been confined to bed for two years, when he developed a voracious reading habit that took in literature, art religion and philosophy. His encounter with the *Diamond Sūtra* had not been an accident but rather was the result of systematic investigation. This reading habit continued for the rest of his life. Secondly, he encountered the Dharma in the written form, not in the form of a human being. This trust in the capacity of the written word to convey the Buddha's teaching was to greatly influence how he taught, and explains the effort he put into conveying his teaching in literary form. Thirdly and most importantly, Sangharakshita's conversion to Buddhism came in the form of a vivid personal insight into the truth of the Dharma, independent of any personal communication from a teacher in a traditional sangha or Buddhist community. Sangharakshita's confidence in his own understanding of the Dharma, outside of an institutional Buddhist context, was to leave its mark everywhere in his life and teaching.

⁷ References to Sangharakshita's writings are to his *Complete Works*, in 27 volumes, currently in process of publication.

Sangharakshita has recounted his years in India in a series of detailed and colourful memoirs.⁸ He deserted the British Army after World War II and became what he described as a ‘freelance wandering ascetic’ in India with a friend. He eventually took ordination as a *śramaṇera* (Buddhist novice monk) in 1949 at Kusinara, receiving the name ‘Sangharakshita’ (‘Protected by the Spiritual Community’). He then spent six months at Benares Hindu University, studying Pāli, Abhidhamma and logic with Bhikṣu Jagdish Kashyap, a powerful figure in the revitalisation of Buddhism in Bihar.⁹ But during a trip to the town of Kalimpong in the Himalayas, near Darjeeling, Kashyap told Sangharakshita to ‘stay here and work for the good of Buddhism’ (Sangharakshita, 2017: 470). Taking the opportunity to subjugate his ego by doing his teacher’s bidding, Sangharakshita did stay in Kalimpong, and based himself there for the rest of his time in India.¹⁰

Having received *bhikṣu* ordination in 1950, Sangharakshita continued to practise meditation, study the Dharma, live communally with other monks and friends, and teach Buddhism whenever asked. This period of absorption of Buddhist teachings and traditions came to fruition in the publication of *A Survey of Buddhism* in 1957, a major work that is still in some ways Sangharakshita’s *magnum opus*. It presents the whole Buddhist tradition so as to explain how its diverse expressions share the one taste of liberation.¹¹ Sangharakshita writes that all Buddhist traditions seek to convey a ‘transcendental principle’ (Sangharakshita, 2018a: 18), an ineffable state which is the goal of the Buddhist life; and the unity of Buddhism consists in the fact that the various Buddhist traditions are pragmatic means to reach that state (2018a: 202). The Bodhisattva ideal of Mahāyāna Buddhism is the unifying factor of Buddhism, an image of a way of life lived in accordance with the goal (2018a: 394).¹²

The scholarly manner of *A Survey of Buddhism* masks the fact that it is a visionary work about how someone ought to study and understand Buddhism in both its essence and development. This explains Sangharakshita’s criticism of Theravāda Buddhism, which he accuses of an unintelligently conservative literalism, regularly using the pejorative term Hīnayāna (‘Inferior Vehicle’) to

⁸ These memoirs have been re-published in Sangharakshita (2017), (2018) and (2019).

⁹ There is a lively biography by Kashyap’s nephew in Narain (1979: xv–xxxii).

¹⁰ For a perspective on Sangharakshita’s work ‘for the good of Buddhism’ in Kalimpong, see Bhutia (2016).

¹¹ This contrasts with a more recent scholarly emphasis on describing Buddhisms (plural), to acknowledge the diversity in Buddhist traditions (e.g. Strong, 2015).

¹² Sangharakshita later modified this account, and identified ‘going for refuge’ as the unifying factor of Buddhism, which includes an altruistic dimension, reflected historically in the Bodhisattva ideal (2019a: 473–5).

describe it, in comparison with the creative adaptability of the Mahāyāna schools (2018a: 187). The *Survey* also shows the first outlines of Sangharakshita's distinctively modernist interpretation of the tradition. This is apparent in his account of 'Basic Buddhism', those fundamental teachings of the Buddha and the early schools which are common to all later and present schools of Buddhism, each of which is absorbed in its own national colours and sectarian forms (2018a: 198f.). The idea of an original teaching of the Buddha, which can be discerned through a close study of the Pāli canon and other ancient sources, was already a common theme among modernist Buddhists.¹³ Anagarika Dharmapala, for instance, appealed to an original teaching as a conscious attempt to reclaim the rational purity and ethical power of the Buddha's message behind or despite traditional Asian Buddhism, as a response to the colonial experience of Christian missionary criticism of Buddhist superstition. Applying methods of textual and historical criticism developed in nineteenth-century scholarship to Pāli canonical sources now revealed an original essence of Buddhism, propounded by the historical Buddha himself, that was both rational and liberating. Sangharakshita's contribution was to identify a Basic Buddhism that, while rationally explicable, pointed to a transcendental experience as its goal. His interpretation also deliberately shook loose from Theravādin monasticism.

A distinctive feature of the modernist interpretation of Buddhism is the claim that the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*) is similar to the modern scientific law of causation.¹⁴ It was an important claim for nineteenth-century proponents of Buddhism that the tradition had always taught that the universe operates according to natural laws of cause and effect (Lopez 2008: 1–31). More specifically, the pioneering Victorian scholars of Buddhism, T.W. and C.A.F. Rhys Davids, wrote that the general formula of dependent arising ('This being, that becomes, from the arising of this, that arises; this not being, that does not become, from the ceasing of this, that ceases') was 'on all fours with the modern formulation of the law of causation – 'That every event is the result or sequel of some previous event, or events, without which it could not have happened, and which, being present, it must take place.'¹⁵ Similarly, Colonel Henry Olcott's influential *Buddhist Catechism* states that 'both Buddhism and science teach that all beings are alike subject to universal law' (Cabezón, 2003: 44).

¹³ Explored in Bechert (1986: 275–6), (1995: 254), also in Lopez (2002: xxxiii–iv), a book which also includes an extract from Sangharakshita's lecture 'The Bodhisattva Principle'.

¹⁴ While Sangharakshita preferred Edward Conze's translation 'conditioned co-production' (2018a: 89), the translation 'dependent arising' is more exact (Jones 2021).

¹⁵ From the introduction to their translation of the *Mahānidāna Sutta* (*Dialogues of the Buddha Part II*, 1910: 42).

Likewise, in his *Survey*, Sangharakshita takes for granted that dependent arising represents the Buddha's teaching of a universal law, applicable to all phenomena (2018a: 93). But, as the intellectual expression of the Buddha's Awakening, the teaching of dependent arising has little in common with the sciences (2018a: 88). Rather, in its details it is both philosophically and practically concerned with humanity's quest for liberation and understanding. Sangharakshita's unique contribution in relation to the interpretation of dependent arising is to discern in it two broad trends. The first, which is articulated in the series of twelve links (*nidānas*), concerns the operation of causation within *saṃsāra*, characterised by repetitions and reactive cycles. The second is concerned with the progressive conditionality of the path to Awakening (2018a: 116), by which, to quote the Buddha, 'states (*dhammas*) overflow into states, states fulfill states, in order to go from here to the beyond'.¹⁶ In this way, dependent arising is an 'all-inclusive formulation of reality' (2018a: 117), describing *saṃsāra* and the path to *nirvāṇa*, although *nirvāṇa* itself is unconditioned, uncaused and not dependently arisen.¹⁷

Sangharakshita's *Survey* shows him as his own kind of Buddhist modernist, engaging with a presentation of the Buddha's teaching that is little concerned to retain a fidelity to any existing Asian or Western Buddhist tradition or lineage. In his account of basic Buddhism he identifies those essential teachings of the historical Buddha and early tradition that underly developments in the later schools, while arguing that the creativity of Mahāyāna Buddhism is truer to the spirit of the Dharma than the conservatism of Theravāda. He interprets the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*) as a universal law, and discerns in the various formulations of the teaching two broad trends in the way the world works. There is a cyclical mode of conditionality, exemplified in the usual twelve links of dependent arising, describing conditioned existence, and a progressive mode, exemplified in less well-known formulations, describing the dependent arising of the path to *nirvāṇa*, the unconditioned. These modernist features of Sangharakshita's teaching remain fundamental to Triratna Buddhism today, providing it with a distinctive intellectual foundation.

¹⁶ From the *Cetanākaraṇīyasutta*, *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 11: 2, PTS V 313, my translation, but also see Bodhi (2012: 1554–5). While Sangharakshita himself does not discuss this discourse, it provides scriptural testimony of his conception of a progressive causal process.

¹⁷ The arguments (2018a: 116–9) for this interpretation rest on the prior scholarship of Mrs Rhys Davids and Dr Beni Madhab Barua. However, they come apart under scrutiny (Sāgaramati 2010). Nevertheless, I would argue that Sangharakshita's intuitions about a progressive mode of conditionality are in some ways prefigured in and supported by early Buddhist teachings (Jones 2019, 2019b, 2019a).

While making Kalimpong his base, Sangharakshita made annual visits to Bombay and elsewhere. In 1952 he met Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, the brilliant lawyer and leader of the Dalits ('the Downcast', formerly known as Untouchables), who had been entrusted with the task of drafting the Indian constitution. Ambedkar had been studying and writing about Buddhism in relation to caste Hinduism. On 14 October 1956, Dr Ambedkar ritually converted to Buddhism, followed by 360,000 of his followers, thus taking themselves out of their former oppressed place at the bottom of caste-ridden Hindu society, and into a new confidence based on the Buddha's teachings. Ambedkar urged Sangharakshita to help teach the Dharma among the Dalits. Six weeks after the first mass conversions, Sangharakshita happened to be in Nagpur in Maharashtra, when news arrived that Ambedkar had died. Sangharakshita found himself trying to console huge gatherings of Ambedkar's distraught followers. In the months and years that followed, Sangharakshita went on annual teaching tours among the new Buddhists of Maharashtra, often travelling from village to village for late-night Dharma talks and meetings. After having returned to the UK in 1964, Sangharakshita returned several times to India for teaching tours among the new Buddhists.¹⁸

His experience with Dr Ambedkar and his followers in India made Sangharakshita aware of the potential of Buddhism to effect positive social change. While such 'engaged Buddhism' is one of the innovations of Buddhist modernism, as seen in various movements both in Asia and the west, an even more evident feature of Buddhist modernism is the 'subjective turn' that Buddhism has taken as it has found a place in the west (McMahan 2009: 188–192). The emphasis on meditation and on the personal and psychological dimensions of practice have intersected nicely with western narratives about individualism. Teaching westerners, however, Sangharakshita has contrasted such a subjective emphasis with the way that Buddhism in India is social engaged, and he encouraged his followers to balance personal practice with public work (2021: 13).

¹⁸ Sangharakshita's meetings with Ambedkar, and his time in Nagpur after Ambedkar's death, are recounted in his memoirs (2018b: 415–6), (2019b: 352–3, 360–7). His book *Ambedkar and Buddhism* presents Ambedkar's life and thought as a whole (2016: 1–159), and Sangharakshita's lectures and talks from tours among the new Buddhists in India are collected in (2016) and (2021). Nagabodhi has written an excellent account of one of these tours (Pilchick 1988). The development of the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community (formerly the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana, or TBMSG) in India is another whole story, but see Padmasuri (1997) and Sponberg (1996).

Ambedkar's Buddhism involved some radical re-interpretations of Buddhist teachings. The emphasis on suffering (*dukkha*) in the Four Noble Truths was demoted, to make the Dharma relevant to Dalit converts, who had suffered caste-based discrimination. Likewise, Ambedkar rejected traditional Buddhist teachings on karma and rebirth, regarding them as justifications for caste injustice, and he re-interpreted the goal of Buddhism in ethical and social terms.¹⁹ Sangharakshita's own form of Buddhist modernism, however, remained in a nuanced and constructive dialogue with Buddhist traditions and traditional Buddhism. While Sangharakshita did not teach as an authorized representative of any specific traditional Buddhist lineage, his informal connections with, and personal understanding of, those lineages in which he studied gave him confidence to establish a new tradition of Buddhist thought and practice. He described the principle of selection which shaped this new tradition as an 'ecumenism' that looks for inspiration and guidance from the scriptures of Asian Buddhism (2019a: 556).

TIBETAN TEACHERS

During the years in which Sangharakshita was in Kalimpong, refugees began to arrive from Tibet, escaping the Chinese backlash to the 1959 uprising against their occupation. Eminent *rimpoches* ('precious teachers') and *tulkus* (reincarnate lamas) found themselves living as strangers in a small Himalayan town in India (2019b: 488), and Sangharakshita was able to meet and sometimes befriend these representatives of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism. Not only did he learn from them about living traditions of Buddhism which otherwise he had encountered only in his reading, but he received initiations into the practice of various *sādhanas* (visualisation practices) as well as taking a new ordination as a bodhisattva in the Mahāyāna tradition.

Chatral Sangye Dorje (1913–2015) was a Lama (teacher) of the Nyingma school, a deeply accomplished meditator, who lived a wandering life, interspersed with periods of solitary meditation in mountain caves. Sangharakshita met him in 1957, in Kalimpong, and he initiated Sangharakshita into the *sādhana* of Green Tārā, with careful instructions about its correct practice.²⁰ In his memoirs, Sangharakshita describes this initiation as a turning point:

¹⁹ Ambedkar's innovations are considered in a positively critical way in Queen (1996) and (2013), and in King (2009: 160–1).

²⁰ This meeting is recounted twice, in (2019b: 372–8) and in (2019b: 390–95). In (2019b: 379), Sangharakshita describes 1957 as his *annus mirabilis*: he had befriended Dhardo Rimpoche while on tour in India, he had met the Dalai Lama, he had received Tantric initiation from Chatral Sangye Dorje, and he had established a Buddhist monastery in Kalimpong.

A new phase in my spiritual life was about to begin. Hitherto I had been a Theravādin monk practising meditation with the help of the Theravādin tradition of *ānāpānasati* or respiration-mindfulness. From now on, while remaining a Theravādin monk, I would be practising meditation with the help of the Mahāyāna-cum-Vajrayāna tradition of mantra-recitation and deity-visualization... Now I was taking up the Green Tārā *sādhana*, and the fact that I was doing so marked an important transition in my spiritual life. (2019b: 375–6)

Sangharakshita also reflected on how the visualization of Green Tārā became for him another way to go beyond his ego, and to access the transcendental realm to which the Green Tārā, and the other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, belonged (2019b: 394).

Later in 1957, through his friend Kachu Rimpoche, Sangharakshita met the great Nyingma lama, Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche (1893–59), from whom he received initiations into the *sādhana*s of Mañjuḥṣa, Avalokiteśvara, Vajrapāṇi and Tārā, together with the instructions for their practice, translated with the help of his friend John Driver.²¹ In 1959, Sangharakshita was able to meet another great Nyingma lama, Dudjom Rimpoche (1904–87), from whom he received the Vajrasattva initiation in an elaborate three-day ceremony, which he shared with John Driver and the writer John Blofeld. He later had the opportunity to ask Dudjom Rimpoche many questions about the complex Tantric practice he had undertaken. Sangharakshita's memoirs convey his impression of the immense spiritual depth and dignity of Dudjom Rimpoche and his other teachers, all of whom were now maintaining their religion in exile (2019b: 501–10).

In 1962 Sangharakshita received the initiation into the visualization of Padmasambhava, the semi-historical figure who had introduced Buddhism into Tibet, and who was also the founder of the Nyingma school. This was from Kachu Rimpoche (1920–81), who also introduced Sangharakshita to the *mūla* yogas (foundation practices), particularly to the Going for Refuge and Prostration practice, and the Vajrasattva visualization and purification practice (2019b: 472–3). Kachu Rimpoche also gave Sangharakshita the name Urgyen,²² by which he was also known until the end of his life. Later in 1962, Sangharakshita received the bodhisattva ordination, an event which marked

²¹ These initiations are recounted in Sangharakshita (2019b: 402–3). Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche also visited Sangharakshita at his monastery, bringing with him his young nephew, Sogyal Rimpoche (2019b: 406), who was later to found the Rigpa movement, and to die in 2018 disgraced by many accusations of sexual misconduct.

²² 'Urgyen' is a Tibetan variant of the Sanskrit Uḍḍiyāna, the name of the country where Padmasambhava is reputed to have been born from within a lotus flower (Sangharakshita, 2019b: 473).

the integration of his ordination into ‘Hīnayāna’ Buddhism into the larger vision of the Mahāyāna. He received this ordination from his friend Dhardo Rimpoche, whom he regarded as himself an exemplar of the bodhisattva ideal, and who explained the eighteen major and forty-six minor precepts to him in detail.²³ Dhardo Rimpoche had been abbot of the Tibetan monastery in Bodh Gaya since 1949, spending the hot summers in Kalimpong, where in 1954 he founded a school for Tibetan refugee children.²⁴ Sangharakshita and Dhardo had worked together in Kalimpong and had become personal friends after a government-sponsored group tour to the Buddhist holy places in India, as part of the celebrations for the 2,500th Buddha Jayanti (anniversary of the Buddha’s birth) in 1956.²⁵

Then in 1963 Sangharakshita got to know another eminent Nyingma lama, Dilgo Khyentse Rimpoche (1910–91), who had recently arrived as a refugee, together with his family. From Dilgo, Sangharakshita received the *phowa* or ‘consciousness transference’ of Amitābha, as well as initiations into the *sādhanas* of Kurukullā (a dancing red *ḍākinī* form of Tārā) and Jambhala (a bodhisattva of wealth, who holds a jewel-producing mongoose). Also in 1963, he received initiations from Dhardo Rimpoche into the practice of Vaiḍūryaprabhā and of White Tārā, who is associated with long life. He worked on a translation of the White Tārā *sādhana* right up until he left India for the UK in 1964 (2019b: 557–62).

Sangharakshita’s deep engagement with Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism might suggest that he had become a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, but this is not how he himself saw the matter. As the quotation above suggests, Sangharakshita saw himself as expanding his knowledge and experience of Buddhism as a whole, as a total tradition, the varieties of which are historically and culturally differentiated expressions of the teaching of the Buddha (2019b: 376). Moreover, he did not become a formal disciple of any of his Tibetan teachers, but rather he received Tantric initiations (*abhisekhas*) from them informally, outside of the strict systems of lineage and ritual that characterise traditional Tantric Buddhism. When he later founded FWBO/Triratna, and passed on the initiations and *sādhanas* to his own disciples, he stressed that these were not, strictly speaking, Tantric initiations, and the FWBO/Triratna was not a Tantric Buddhist movement.²⁶ He re-interpreted Tantric initiation

²³ These events are recounted in (Sangharakshita 2019b: 542–3); Sangharakshita’s translation of the bodhisattva precepts is reproduced in (2019a: 657–9).

²⁴ On the life of Dhardo Rimpoche (1917–1990), see Suvajra (1991).

²⁵ Sangharakshita recounts the tour in (2019b: 329–55); see also Suvajra (1991: 90–99).

²⁶ Subhuti (2010).

as an aspect of Going for Refuge, the central and defining Buddhist act (Subhuti, 1994: 97).

In his engagement with Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna *abhiṣekha* and *sādhana*, Sangharakshita would seem to be far from Buddhist modernism. He had plunged into the traditional world of Tibetan Buddhism and into the visualisation of elaborate Indo-Tibetan Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, participating in a religious milieu very distant from western science and rationalism. Sangharakshita himself knew that he had been following his spiritual instincts rather than a pre-determined idea of what Buddhism ought to be. He later reflected that ‘the course of my life had been determined by impulse and intuition rather than by reason and logic... An idea or concept was clarified in the process of its being acted upon’ (2019a: 406). But his immersion in the magic and mystery of Tibetan Buddhism prompted what might be understood as two related trains of thought and reflection concerning the place of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in his sense of the unity of Buddhism. One train of thought was to contribute to his distinctive idea of the centrality of Going for Refuge, to which I will return. The other was to understand the power and meaning of *sādhana* as an activity of the *imagination*, a human faculty which was capable of touching transcendental truth.²⁷ In this way, Sangharakshita fully participated in the modernist movement of demythologising the traditional Buddhist worldview, in this case, the literal existence of the myriads of Buddha-fields and the gorgeous panoply of celestial Bodhisattvas in the vastness of the traditional Buddhist cosmos. Instead, all this richness became re-interpreted as a particular flowering of the power of imagination, accessible to modern westerners without them needing to take on a belief in traditional Asian cosmology.

ART AND IMAGINATION

Sangharakshita’s trust in the power of imagination to touch on transcendental truth is inseparable from his devotion to the arts – literature, music, painting and the rest – as portals to the same truth and beauty as the Dharma. His engagement with the arts began when he was a child. He describes reading Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as ‘the greatest poetic experience of my life’ (2017: 36). His passion for poetry and painting did not diminish even when he became a Buddhist monk, but instead led to a deep conflict between two sides of himself that he later dubbed ‘Sangharakshita I’ and ‘Sangharakshita II’:

²⁷ Sangharakshita touches on the scope of imagination in (2019b: 152); Vessantara takes up Sangharakshita’s approach, describing the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as ‘archetypal figures which express aspects of Enlightenment’ (1993: 8), interpreting the Mahāyāna cosmos in psychological terms.

Sangharakshita I wanted to enjoy the beauty of nature, to read and write poetry, to listen to music, to look at painting and sculpture, to experience emotion, to lie in bed and dream, to see places, to meet people. Sangharakshita II wanted to realize the truth, to read and write philosophy, to observe the precepts, to get up early and meditate, to mortify the flesh, to fast and pray. Sometimes Sangharakshita I was victorious, sometimes Sangharakshita II, while occasionally there was an uneasy duumvirate. (2017: 451)

It was only after Sangharakshita II burned some notebooks containing Sangharakshita I's poems, leaving them both shocked, that they learned to respect each other's work (2017: 452).

While living in Kalimpong, Sangharakshita became friends with Lama Anagarika Govinda (1898–1985), a German living in northern India with his wife, deeply immersed in both Theravāda and Tibetan Buddhism, and also a painter and poet. The deep affinities between Govinda and Sangharakshita included a passionate belief in the spiritual significance of art. From Govinda's short book, *Art and Meditation* (1999), Sangharakshita took up the idea of art as connected to egolessness, in the sense of the expansion of consciousness beyond its usual limitations that is characteristic of artistic inspiration.²⁸ In another essay, Sangharakshita describes the process of artistic appreciation as 'a conscious surrender to the beautiful', a process of transformation that parallels the Buddha's path to Awakening.²⁹

The scholar David McMahan sees Sangharakshita's emphasis on the arts as part of his Buddhist modernism, placing him in the company of D.T. Suzuki, Chogyam Trungpa and others. In the background is the intuition that many of the insights and attitudes of western Romanticism resonate with Buddhism. McMahan suggests that this resonance begins with the Romantic theory of art as self-expression, of internal states overflowing into the art-work. 'To Buddhist modernists, this may seem self-evidently to be the position of traditional forms of Buddhism. After all, if the essence of Buddhism is meditation, then Buddhist art must be an expression of meditation' (McMahan 2009: 138). But art in traditional Buddhism in fact functions primarily iconically and ritually. Creative imagination may be involved in the production of traditional Buddhist art, but not as self-expression: 'the Romantic interpretation of Buddhist art, emphasising the expression of interior depths, spontaneity, and individual originality, was something new to Buddhism' (2009: 139). Sangharakshita's emphasis on the arts should be understood, therefore, as another distinctive contribution to his presentation of Buddhism to modern westerners, and in this

²⁸ In the essay, 'The Meaning of Buddhism and the Value of Art' (Sangharakshita 2022: 102–32).

²⁹ In the essay, 'The Religion of Art' (Sangharakshita 2022: 148–96).

sense as a particularly important aspect of his modernism. The emphasis on the spiritual significance of the arts has gone on to have a defining effect on the Buddhist movement that he founded, in which various engagements with the arts are understood to have a refining and transformative effect on the mind and heart.³⁰

GOING FOR REFUGE

In 1964 Sangharakshita returned to the UK, invited by the English Sangha Trust to become resident *bhikkhu* at the Hampstead Vihara in London. His teaching of the Dharma changed to take into account the very different culture and conditions of the modern west. A good example is his presentation of the Buddhist path in terms of the ‘Higher Evolution’ of the individual, which presents the Buddhist spiritual path as the next step in an evolutionary process towards transcendental consciousness, as a matter of choice and effort by individual human beings.³¹ He also continued teaching in an ecumenical way, presenting Mahāyāna Buddhism alongside the original teaching of the Buddha. But he gradually threw off the cultural baggage of Theravādin monasticism, such as wearing robes, which meant little in London and impeded communication. This led, in 1967, to him being disinvited from returning to the Hampstead Vihara after a farewell tour of India. Instead he founded a new Buddhist movement – the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. His guiding of this fledgling modern Buddhist community over the next fifty years was his main life-work.³²

An important development was his realisation that Order members were neither monastic nor lay, and that *commitment* was primary, and lifestyle (such as that of a *bhikkhu*) was secondary. This innovation was the result of many years of reflection. Not only had Sangharakshita found many Theravādin *bhikkhus* to be unnecessarily formalistic and literal in their attitudes, maintaining the monk-lay divide for unhelpful reasons, but he had concluded that the Theravādin

³⁰ The Buddhist modernist emphasis on the arts has not gone without criticism. Ṭhānissaro (2015) has written a sustained critique of the interpretation of the Dharma through Romanticism.

³¹ See Sangharakshita (2018b: 83) for his first reflections on ‘Higher Evolution’; (2020: 226–7) for an account of a lecture in 1966 on the theme; and (2020: 371) for his reading in preparation for two lecture series (1969)(1970). For an expansion of the theme, see Cooper (1996).

³² Sangharakshita recounts his version of the events of 1964–1970, including the difficult period of his disinvitation, in (2020). There is a dearth of other accounts, but see Webb (2016) for a broader history of the Hampstead Buddhist Vihāra.

ordination lineage was irreparably tainted and ‘impure’ by its own standards.³³ But if the institution of the monastic saṅgha, founded by the Buddha himself and preserved in carefully-regulated ordination lineages ever since, was not the central and defining feature of Buddhism, what was? Sangharakshita came to the radical conclusion that *going for refuge* was the central and defining act of a Buddhist, the act which made one a follower of the Buddha and practitioner of the Dharma. This might be expressed through taking up the monastic life in an Asian tradition, but in the conditions of the modern west this was not necessarily the most effective way to live out a commitment to the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.³⁴

Sangharakshita’s account of Going for Refuge is a new interpretation of what it means to be a Buddhist. In early Buddhist literature, many people are said to ‘go for refuge’ to the Buddha, his teaching, and the spiritual community, having heard a discourse and taken it to heart. In these contexts, it is a way of expressing a conversion experience.³⁵ In the ancient Indian context, to ‘go for refuge’ is an idiomatic way of saying one places oneself under a powerful person’s protective influence, and for early Buddhists this becomes a metaphor for placing one’s trust in the Buddha and his teachings, as a means to navigate the human situation.³⁶ In later Buddhist tradition, going for refuge, in the form of reciting the refuges and precepts, became a formal way of expressing that one is a Buddhist. Sangharakshita re-created this idiom as signifying commitment. There are ‘levels’ of going for refuge. ‘Ethnic’ going for refuge is reciting the refuges as a member of a traditional Buddhist group, as a mark of Buddhist religious identity. ‘Provisional’ going for refuge means taking it more seriously, and ‘effective’ going for refuge is a genuine commitment to the path. ‘Real’ going for refuge refers to experiencing insight and becoming a stream-entrant (*śrotāpanna*).³⁷ In Sangharakshita’s re-interpretation, ‘going for refuge’ also becomes a capacious concept for articulating various dimensions of the Buddhist tradition, considered as a transcendental unity. The going-forth from home into homeless life, and the lifestyle of a monastic, are valuable to the

³³ This conclusion, which of course has implications for the wider Buddhist world, since many *bhikkhus* take up Theravādin monastic life with trusting faith in its foundation and efficacy, was presented in two polemical works, *Forty-Three Years Ago*, and *Was the Buddha a Bhikkhu?*, collected in Sangharakshita (2019a).

³⁴ The fullest account of Sangharakshita’s thinking on the centrality of Going for Refuge is in *The History of My Going for Refuge*, in (2019a).

³⁵ Sangharakshita’s edited lectures on the meaning of ‘conversion’ in Buddhism are reprinted in (2019a).

³⁶ This summarises my essay on “Going for refuge’ as idiom and metaphor’ (Jones 2013).

³⁷ Summarised from Sangharakshita (2019a: 481–2), who goes on to list ‘ultimate’ and ‘cosmic’ going for refuge as further levels.

extent that they express one's going for refuge, considered as the defining Buddhist act. One goes forth from the 'group', from this or that social identity, and going for refuge implies the emergence of the true individual, who is self-aware, emotionally positive, and morally responsible (Sangharakshita, 2019a: 414). Most importantly, Sangharakshita identifies the arising of the *bodhicitta* or 'will to Awakening', which initiates the life of a Bodhisattva, who is committed to Awakening for the benefit of all, not as something above and beyond a merely 'Hīnayāna' commitment, but rather as the *altruistic dimension* of going for refuge. In this way, the spiritual impulse of the Mahāyāna movement is re-interpreted as belonging in the very heart and centre of Buddhism (2019a: 433). And going for refuge is explicitly invoked in the foundational 'Going for Refuge and Prostration' practice of Tantric Buddhism, a 'transposition of the act of Going for Refuge into the rich and colourful mode of the Indo-Tibetan Tantric tradition' (2019a: 445).

BUDDHISM AND TRADITION

The justification for this extraordinary re-interpretation of Buddhism can be better understood by considering Sangharakshita's view of the Buddhist tradition. In order to identify the essential principle of Buddhism, he distinguishes between 'tradition' and 'Tradition':

I distinguish between Tradition with a capital T and tradition with a small t. By tradition with a small t I mean those observances, customs, practices, which have become traditional in Buddhist countries but are quite peripheral in relation to the fundamental principles of Buddhist teachings... I think of Tradition in the sense of the essential principles of Buddhism. (Sangharakshita, 2019b: 469)³⁸

Using this distinction, Sangharakshita can set aside much of what counts as 'traditional Buddhism' in both Asian and western Buddhist settings as 'peripheral' (including the monk-lay divide and those aspects of Theravādin monasticism which are formalistic and literalistic); and then he can ascertain what counts as Buddhist Tradition, the essential and fundamental principles of Buddhism (including the centrality of going for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha).

³⁸ I am drawing this quotation slightly out of context, which is Sangharakshita's book-length rebuttal of an academic article which had characterised the FWBO as a form of 'Protestant Buddhism'. In the course of this book, Sangharakshita does in fact touch on the topic of modernism (2019b: 424f.), but unfortunately without taking into account the more specific and useful analyses of 'Buddhist modernism' made by Bechert (and later McMahan) that I have used in this article.

The first stage in this process illustrates the process of ‘de-traditionalization’ that, according to David McMahan, is characteristic of Buddhist modernism (2009: 424). More generally, this process implies that modern Buddhists re-orient themselves to a sense of internal authority, away from relying on an external, institutional religious traditions such as those embodied in pre-modern Asian Buddhism. But Sangharakshita’s identification of Buddhist Tradition (with a capital T), which communicates the essential principles of the teaching, implies something like a ‘re-traditionalization’ of Buddhism, in terms of, for instance, the centrality of going for refuge for the Buddhist life. Such ‘re-traditionalization’ allows Sangharakshita and his followers to understand Buddhism as a unified whole, seeing Mahāyāna Buddhism, for instance, as embodying the altruistic dimension of going for refuge. To do so does not ignore the historical processes which led to the arising of Mahāyāna but rather re-interprets traditional Buddhist narratives about it, such as the idea that the Mahāyāna sūtras were taught by the Buddha.

The movement that Sangharakshita founded, FWBO/Tiratna, thus represents itself as a new Buddhist tradition for the modern west, based on the essential principles of the Dharma. But how can such a radical re-interpretation of Buddhism be justified, in terms of the Buddhist tradition? Or, to put it another way, on what authority can Sangharakshita present a re-interpretation of Buddhism as ‘Buddhist tradition’? Obviously, an unfriendly reading could reveal some hubris in Sangharakshita’s enterprise,³⁹ but here I will attempt a positive interpretation.

The history of Buddhism shows that Sangharakshita is not the first to re-interpret the teaching in new conditions, under pressure of a strong visionary sense of the essence of the Dharma. One thinks of Shinran or Nichiren in medieval Japan. More importantly, the Buddha himself is recorded in the *Kālāma Sutta* as encouraging his hearers to weigh up for themselves what is presented as tradition, judging teachings by their efficacy, not by the teacher’s authority.⁴⁰ The structure of Buddhism through the centuries has not been held up by claims of authority but rather by the handing-on of the living Dharma through teacher-student relationships. This does not preclude self-organised systems of thought (such as Abhidharma or Madhyamaka) with their own internal standards of coherence; but should these systems claim to be the only

³⁹ The website <https://triratna-perspectives.com> gathers criticism of Sangharakshita and Triratna.

⁴⁰ In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3: 65, trans. Bodhi (2012: 279–83), and discussed in relation to Buddhist modernism in McMahan (2009: 44, 64–65).

true interpretation, they simply run into conflict with the Buddha's teaching. Buddhism is just one long conversation about the Dharma.⁴¹

With this in mind, I propose that Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma can be compared to a tent, held up by two poles. One pole is his teaching of the 'true individual'. This can be seen as Sangharakshita's clarification of the Buddha's well-known teaching of not-self (*anātman*). This teaching denies that there is a fixed and permanent essence of the person. The corollary is that one can change and develop. One way to characterise such personal development is in terms of the development of qualities of the true individual: awareness, integration, positivity, and a certain independence and autonomy which is the basis of creativity (2017a: 467–92). Such an individual would indeed respond to the Dharma as the Buddha recommended the Kālāmas did, by testing it for themselves, not relying on an authority. Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma is justified by its success for those who use it to develop.

The other pole of the tent is Sangharakshita's 'transcendental critique of religion'. He develops this idea from a reading of the *Vimalakīrti Nīrdeśa*, a Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture in which a Buddhist householder named Vimalakīrti is shown to be more awakened than the most advanced Bodhisattvas, in fact, to be a Buddha living as a householder for the sake of living beings. Vimalakīrti takes the Bodhisattvas to task for their limited understanding of the Dharma, hence undertaking a 'transcendental critique' of their teachings. Likewise, the teaching of the Dharma should not be a matter of teaching one or other tradition of Buddhism as an end in itself, but rather should be a means for the spiritual development of the individual:

As Vimalakīrti's 'transcendental critique' serves to remind us, the Hīnayāna is a means to an end. The Mahāyāna is a means to an end. Buddhism is a means to an end. Religion is a means to an end. And that end is the spiritual development of the individual. (Sangharakshita, 2017b: 514)

As Sangharakshita writes, such a critique has always been a part of Buddhism: the Buddha taught his Dharma as being like a raft, for getting across to nirvāṇa, the further shore of existence, not for holding on to.⁴² Since Sangharakshita's

⁴¹ I once asked Sangharakshita on what basis he claimed the authority to mediate the entire Buddhist tradition in his teachings to Triratna. His reply was that he had no authority; he was simply a spiritual friend. For Sangharakshita on authority in the Saṅgha see (2017a: 445f).

⁴² In the *Alaggaḍūḷa Sutta*, 'Discourse on the Simile of the Water-Snake', *Majjhima Nikāya* 22, trans. Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi (1995: 228).

presentation of the Dharma is a means to an end, it is justified by its effectiveness in helping people develop.

CONCLUSION

Sangharakshita's life and work have not been without controversy.⁴³ His critique of Theravāda monasticism and his creative interpretations of the Dharma have inevitably not gone undisputed, but such debate between Buddhists has been going on since the beginning of the tradition.⁴⁴ Some of his more particular teachings, for instance about women and about blasphemy, have proved objectionable.⁴⁵ But these teachings had their time and place. More controversial, however, has been Sangharakshita's sex life. Between 1968 and 1985, he had sexual relationships with some male disciples in the FWBO, leading to reports of resulting harm and negative emotional impact because of the power imbalance involved. The subsequent culture of denial within FWBO/Triratna compounded the situation. However, an internal investigation culminated in 2020 with the publication of a full report, illustrating a process of Triratna Order members coming to terms with the mistakes of their teacher.⁴⁶

The theme of 'Buddhist modernism' has given me a method to draw out some of Sangharakshita's approaches, understandings and teachings of the Dharma, although there has not been space to mention all of them.⁴⁷ In the end, however, Sangharakshita's approach to Buddhism is so unique, and his teaching of the Dharma so much a product of his own thinking, that the label of 'Buddhist modernist' is of limited use. When Sangharakshita died in 2018, he was 93, and had been thinking, writing and sharing his thoughts until the end. He was buried in a brightly-painted cardboard coffin at Adhithana retreat centre in Herefordshire, in the UK, where he had lived for his last five years. His remains now lie under a mound, reminiscent of a bronze age barrow. A garden planted around the mound gives visitors and retreatants the chance to quietly contemplate Sangharakshita's life and legacy. There is so much to take in that the process of reflecting on his work as a whole has only just begun.

⁴³ The recent biography of Sangharakshita by Nagabodhi (2023) does not shy away from these controversies.

⁴⁴ Criticisms summarised in Bluck (2006: 178); Robert Ellis (2020) has written the first major critical study of Sangharakshita's thought.

⁴⁵ Especially the views on women presented in Subhuti (1995); for a critical study of the teaching on blasphemy in Triratna, see Wilson (2019).

⁴⁶ See the Adhithana Kula Report (2020).

⁴⁷ Sangharakshita's teaching of the 'five niyamas' as suggestive of his fundamental philosophical view is one; see Subhuti (2010b), and my own account of it as a Buddhist modernist interpretation in Jones (2022).

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