

Encountering Padmasambhava

Talk by Satyalila for Padmasambhava Festival 29 September 2017

Padmasambhava is an important figure in the Buddhist tradition and in Tibet. He stands at the mysterious crossroads where history and myth meet. He's said to have lived in the 8th century but the story of his 'Life' transcends space and time. He is the tantric guru par excellence, transforming demon energies into spiritual qualities. He is Padmasambhava the sorcerer as well as Padmasambhava the monk. He shape-shifts and fascinates us to go beyond ourselves into unimagined realms.

Bhante Sangharakshita has a particular connection with Padmasambhava – one of his teachers gave him the name 'Urgyen' which means 'belonging to the land of Uddiyana' (birthplace of Padmasambhava). He once said that he felt that Uddiyana was his 'true home'.

Whatever you make of all this, this is an invitation to 'meet' Padmasambhava in your own heart-mind, in your own imagination. And I mean imagination in the way that William Blake meant it. Imagination as the 'crowning' aspect of the 'four-fold man', our 'highest faculty'. We are made up of reason, sensing, emotion and imagination. If we want to be free of the bonds of samsaric existence, we need all of these aspects of ourselves fully developed and working in relationship with each other. Padmasambhava can help us to unfold them...

reason – our 'rational side', is just one aspect of us and, in conjunction with the other qualities, can transform itself into wisdom

sensing – our visceral, embodied, felt relationship with world, is a quality which can transform into energy - 'energy in pursuit of the good' or virya, in conjunction with the other qualities. The energy which is 'all accomplishing'

emotion – our 'heart' aspect, is a quality we all have which, in conjunction with the other qualities, can transform into the quality of compassion (and spiritual friendship or kalyana mitrata). A heart-connection with everything that lives.

imagination – our 'imaginative side', is a faculty of intuition, (often under-used). In conjunction with the other qualities, it can transform into aesthetic appreciation for all of our experience and for all of life, seeing the beauty in everything.

We all have these aspects, these faculties, though you'll probably immediately see that some people have a naturally strong bent towards reason, some to emotion and so forth. What matters is that, if we want to be free and we want to be *whole*, we all need to cultivate these qualities in their unique way within each of us. There's no one-size fits all template. Each one of us grows into a different garden – we've got different 'personality seeds' in us, but the same energies flow through us.

The garden metaphor for the spiritual life is a familiar one. But there's also another one, which comes from the 18th century poet, painter and visionary William Blake (a great hero of Bhante Sangharakshita). Blake thought the cultivation of the 'complete person' could be seen as being like building a *city*, - not the kind of 'concrete jungle' the word might bring to mind today, but a city alive with human imagination and creativity, a civilisation, in the best sense of the word. In order to build this 'city', all the different aspects, the different 'energies' of the individual need to be gathered together as 'building materials', in much the same way as the Buddha taught that the unification of energies (or spiritual faculties) was essential to enlightenment.

The image of building as a metaphor for the spiritual life is graphically explored in the story of Padmasambhava. In this case it involves the building not of a literal city, but the building of the monastery of Samye in Tibet. If you google 'Samye Tibet' you can see pictures of it on the web it's not just one little building - it looks not unlike a small city, with dozens of buildings, laid out in a kind of 'mandala' pattern.

So the idea here is the physical city (or monastery) is an image or metaphor for the enlightened mind. And that, to bring the enlightened mind into being the 'building materials' are our own dissipated energies, which often fall into this fourfold classification of reason, sensing, emotion and imagination.

History¹

"Padmasambhava was instrumental in establishing Buddhism in Tibet in the eight Century. The King, Trhison Detsen, wanted to strengthen Budddhism by building the monastery of Samye, but he was faced with fierce opposition from the indigenous shamanistic religion, the Bonpos. He persuaded a Buddhist Abbot, Santarakshita, to come from Nepal, but though he achieved a certain amount, even he couldn't overcome the Bonpos on his own because they'd been using witchcraft against them. So he suggested calling on

1 Paraphrased from *Meeting the Buddhas by Vessantara* – see footnote 6 on page 7 for more details.

Padmasambhava who was not only a master of Buddhist scholarship but also a *siddha*, an adept in the psychic powers generated by Tantric meditation.

So we could say that the conventional, worldly approach of the King wasn't enough. The approach of the great and scholarly abbot wasn't enough, either. Something more was needed to meet and transform the forces inimical to the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet

A personal parallel

I recognise a parallel in my own life.

- In my 20s I tried to 'save the world' and – as the Oxfam slogan had it - 'make a difference' by working very hard for charities. I was driven by emotion and used will-power and sheer bloody mindedness to do things that seemed 'reasonable'. It didn't work. I got very depressed and burned out. I didn't have all my energies engaged.
- When I began practising, I tried very hard to be a good Buddhist, to study and practice the Dharma and understand it all. It did have an effect, but not strongly enough. I didn't burn out but nor was I 'fully alive in my practice' either. I didn't have all my energies engaged.
- Finally I gave up trying to understand and work it all out rationally and realised – from my own experience – that there was more to it all than my rational (often cynical) mind wanted to admit. Not only did I start writing and connecting with my own 'inner depths' more, I also started to discover that something in me responded to all this 'oo-ey woo-ey stuff' in Buddhism - all these 'men in funny hats', as I used to think of the various archetypal figures like Padmasambhava and the other Bodhisattvas. *How* that happened is another story. But happen it did.

Padmasambhava had actually been there, in a way calling me, since my very first Triratna thing *ever*, a retreat at the end of 1993. I heard the long, slow Padmasambhava mantra... Something in my world rippled a little.. But that was as far as it went.

In the autumn of 1995 we had a Croydon' Women's Weekend at Rivendell. We made khatvangas (ritual staffs), invoked Padmasambhava strongly. It was where I learned the invocation we started with and I've never forgotten it. Padmasambhava started to have an effect in my life. Lots started to change. I went forth, over the next couple of years from my home, relationship and career. My parents both died. My life turned into a cremation ground. Padmasambhava traditionally meditates in cremation grounds. If you hang out that close to impermanence and insubstantiality in a positive-enough

mental state for long enough, something radically changes in your relationship with the world.

I didn't have a lot of positivity of my own, but I **had** put myself into a very strong Sangha context, living and working with other Mitras and Order Members, and *their* positivity supported me through that time, until I learned how to grown some of my own. *How* I 'grew' that positivity was partly with the help of Padmasambhava.

Padmasambhava is famous for subduing and transforming demons. There were all kinds of demons in Tibet when he got there. The King was trying to build this great big monastery and the local demons didn't like it. I'll read a short passage from the magical, mysterious 'biography' of Padmasambhava – *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava*²:

“Then the foundations were laid for the walls, but a nāga whose abode was a rose bush with beautiful petals, knowing that in order to build his rose bush would be cut down, resisted and called the genies to his aid. Yakṣas and amānuṣas, in concert with three gaynen, destroyed by night what had been built during the day, and carried back earth and stones to their previous places.”

Lines 13-19 Canto 58 of *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava*

Now, whilst I do feel sorry for the nāga whose rosebush was on the site of the Palace, I **also** understand it metaphorically. We all have these familiar 'abodes', places and ways of being. We are attached to them and don't want to leave them. We don't want them to change and **we** don't want to change.

So what happens? Well other, deeper forces of the psyche come up – energy-sapping depression, debilitating panic-attacks, binding-webs of anxious proliferative thought (prapanca), even psychosis. They are, in a way, 'demons' which the mind throws up in response to challenge and difficulty and change. They sap our natural capacity for positivity.

² Sangharakshita reviewed *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava* in a piece called 'Padmasambhava Comes to the West' in *Alternative Traditions* (which will be re-printed in Volume 13 of his Complete Works in 2019). In the review he said "Reading *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava* one gets the impression not only of a vivid and powerful spiritual 'personality' heroically battling with the forces of evil but also of a stream of impersonal spiritual energy which is coterminous with historical Buddhism itself and which, intervening in the course of events age after age, and assuming a variety of forms, brings under its control all the swirling emotional-psychic energies which at one or another level of mundane existence obstruct the liberating influence of the Dharma. This impression is heightened by the fact that Padmasambhava is actually involved in some of the most important events of Buddhist history, as well as by the fact that, at various stages of his career, he is known by different names." He also likens parts of the work to the late prophetic books of William Blake.

I don't know about you, but I certainly remember from times when I've been depressed that the mornings are the worst. That moment when I opened one eye and had that terrible realisation that there was yet another interminable day stretching before me. All the positive mental states I'd carefully cultivated the day before had vanished, swept away by 'unseen forces' in the night. I'd effected some change by my practice, but it hadn't reached deep enough into the underground chambers of my mind where these demon-samskaras dwell.

So in the story, told in the extraordinary two-volume work *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava*, he comes to Tibet and, even before he gets to Lhasa and meets the King, there are a LOT of demons out to get him. I'll read you a bit from Canto 60... [reading from first few stanzas of Canto 60]

So. He transforms the demons.

One of the ways he does this is with a phurba or demon-dagger (also called a kīla), a 'three sided peg, stake, knife or nail-like ritual implement' which is used '... to hold demons or thoughtforms in place (once they have been expelled from their human hosts, for example) "in order [as Wikipedia puts it!] that their mindstream may be re-directed and their inherent obscurations transmuted.' . We can do this by ritually 'pinning' the demon (or thought-form or samskara) with the phubha and *naming* it. That is one of the ways to change something. When you really *name* something, really bring it into awareness, it naturally changes. It is transformed in and by the light of your awareness. This is what was happening the passage I just read, where he binds them with an oath and entrusts a treasure to their care.

I had such a *horrible* time with my mental states for the first quite-a-lot-of years of my practice that it made complete sense me to relate to the imagery and language of demons and Mara. I *did* feel that there 'inimical' forces at work in me which were wanting to stop me from 'getting free of their clutches'. If I could objectify them and come into relationship with them, *then* I experienced that energy as transforming.

Padmsambhava stands as an intermediary between the historical and the mythic world. We have this represented on our shrine, with Bhante at the front, very much 'in this world', but in a picture known as the 'Mythophanic Psychopomp'³, which means 'guide of souls'. That basically means he's inviting us to something 'beyond' the mundane, the samsaric, the every day.

3 Google 'Sangharakshita mythophanic psychopomp' to see the image and for a video of Lokeshvara talking about the picture.

Above (and beyond) Bhante on the shrine we have Padmasambhava. He's representing that in-between realm. And beyond and above *him*, we've an image of Vajrasattva, the 'diamond-thunderbolt-being' who is an entirely archetypal figure who represents reality or absolute purity – the 'essential diamond nature which is the essence of sunyata'. There are various words in what I just said which you need to treat carefully and not take literally! Eg 'soul', 'essential nature', 'essence'. They're all being used in a way that is beyond the normal, literal use of the words. They're being used *provisionally* as way of pointing to something 'beyond themselves'. I don't mean a permanent, substantial 'soul' or 'essence' or 'essential nature'.

So what's going on here [on the shrine]? Bhante is guiding us to Padmasambhava, the threshold between the historical and the mythic. Padmasambhava guides towards Vajrasattva (in fact he **meditates on** Vajrasattva in the cremation grounds where he practises.)

And all of that description I've just given is made up of *words* which are also 'leading us' to something beyond the normal range of our experience. It's mysterious. If we could grasp it with our rational minds that would be a *terrible thing* because it would mean that all that vastness and extraordinary transcendental truth was *reducible* to something like the rational mind. The universe, reality is *much* bigger and more amazing and marvellous than just what the poor old rational mind can cope with. That's Padmasambhava's challenge to us!

I'd love to say more about Bhante and Padmasambhava but there's not time tonight. But I will mention that there's a fascinating chapter in this book of Bhante's, *Precious Teachers*⁴ where he talks about his own 'meeting' with Padmasambhava and what unfolded. I recommend it.

This evening I want us experience more of the sense the 'person' (or **persons!**) of Padmasambhava. And to do that I'm going to draw on some of Vessantara's words in *Meeting the Tantric Deities*⁵.

“As presented in his life story, Padmasambhava becomes a kind of portmanteau figure – the embodiment in one person of all the accumulated knowledge, wisdom, love, and power of the Buddhist tradition. He is a master of all secular arts and sciences, as well as of all three *yanas* of Buddhism. In this way he represents the guru *par excellence*, for a guru prepares himself for his task of communicating

4 An e-book of *Precious Teachers* is available from Windhorse Publications and it will be included in Volume 22 of Sangharakshita's Complete Works, due for publication in 2020.

5 Published by Windhorse Publications

the dharma by first making himself a receptacle of the Buddhist tradition. From his teachers he receives the nectar of the Dharma, handed down from teacher to disciple ever since Shakyamuni managed to communicate it to Kaundinya in the Deer Park at Sarnath.

I am reminded of a scene from an old Hollywood film, in which at a party of the rich and famous there was a great pyramid of champagne glasses. A liveried waiter arrived with a great bottle of champagne and kept pouring it into the top glass. When this was full it over flowed, and the bubbling liquid filled each tier of glasses, down and down in a foaming cascade. It is as though Shakyamuni is the top glass, who has made himself open to the transcendental. However, anyone who has absorbed the champagne brilliance of the dharma cannot help but let it flow through them to others. In this way lineages of teaching are created. Padmasambhava represents the confluence of all these lineages – he is like a great crystal chalice in which all the bubbling streams of the Dharma meet.”

*Meeting the Buddhas*⁶ p 244

Vessantara goes on to describe how Padmasambhava takes on numerous different forms at different times and stages of his life. And how this is symbolic of the many spiritual deaths – and re-namings – we all need to undergo during the spiritual life as we ‘die’ to our older, ‘smaller’ and ‘less unified’ selves and are re-born with more and more of our energies unified. With more and more of our facets and faculties available to us – and to respond to the ‘cries of the world.

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⁶ This is reference to the original edition. *Meeting the Buddhas* has now been republished in 3 volumes, the third of which *Meeting the Tantric Deities* includes this passage about Padmasambhava. It is published by Windhorse Publications.