

Everywhere Buddhas

Since the start of the Padmaloka Shrine Project back in 2007 a certain amount of thought and research and general digging around has been necessary due to the variety of issues that present themselves if we are to attempt the task with any degree of integrity. The reason for this is that we have the unique and dangerous privilege of viewing a multiplicity of 'Traditions' from Buddhist history. The Dharma has manifested in a variety of geographical, historical and Cultural settings if viewed in a linear time frame plus the movement is not simply a missionary continuation of any particular school or sect from this vast and varied 'History'. As the Sculptor Henry Moore pointed out, if Art does not build upon tradition all one is left with is novelty, so in attempting to find compelling images symbolising our highest values and ideals we cannot just give free reign to our contemporary notions of 'creativity' or individually attempt the modern compulsion to 'express ourselves', ignoring all that has gone before - It is perfectly possible to breathe life into whatever remnants of these multiple traditions that we may happen to find attractive and meaningful, any image may appeal to us from across the centuries or through the palimpsest of the host cultures. Whilst this may suffice for personal practice, it cannot be the basis for the development of a coherent visual language for an entire community practising in new and unique circumstances.

We have certain objective starting points already established as parts of our history. The Sadhanas that we are given during our Private Ordination ceremony symbolize our own particular 'personal' approach to the Dharma - the 'Path' for each individual. The vast majority of these Sadhana's originate from Bhante's various Tibetan teachers, so the Forms described are embedded in that Indo-Tibetan phase of history, but that does not mean that we are practising within any particular sect of Tibetan Buddhism that preserved and transmitted those forms. They are practises that Bhante has found to be of significance in and of themselves in a way that transcends their original setting. So those Figures described in the texts that many of us have been practising for decades are already part of our common language that cannot just be ignored or erased. Therefore, in producing images for the movement we must respect those forms even if we are not confined to the very rigid systems of reproduction adopted by their various schools of iconography. Unfortunately, we have not inherited any living strand of Buddhist Iconography whilst at the same time we are told that to alter or modify any of the various templates adhered to by the various 'traditions' is to distort or falsify the Dharma. History shows us however that these various systems were only developed when the original stream of inspiration began to falter under

the erosions of time, in an attempt to preserve the surviving evidence of that stream. We can also look at how those forms are represented and preserved in other traditions that no Tibetan artist would have been remotely aware of, which may help us get a deeper understanding of what those forms are attempting to communicate.

The images that I have been producing over the years in conjunction with the Padmaloka Community are part of a very long process of discovery and as such, something of an experiment. Bhante has worked hard to reveal the archaic core of the Buddha's communication, the common source of all the varied manifestations of the Dharma in space and time. He also stresses the necessity of Myth and Symbol to encompass its ultimate undefined and undefinable meaning. Kukai said that without colour and form the Dharma cannot be communicated. The Dharma cannot be illuminated merely by words and concepts, however indispensable they may be. Whatever the 'artists' of the movement produce is the result of our collective context regardless of how conscious of that any individual may be. It is the result of the conditions and circumstances generated by our collective endeavour to create an effective Sangha. Every commission, conversation, comment, suggestion, or criticism, all feeds into that. At this point in time this process is largely unconscious. It is not a question of whether or not one 'likes' this or that piece of work but seeing it as part of our collective compost that eventually will allow forms of genuine worth to blossom.

We need to use our inheritance with intelligence and imagination....With time, out of the depths of our own individual and collective practise we will discover the compelling forms for these new conditions and circumstances. I do question why it is that the movement doesn't seem to attract more visual artists, by that I mean people whose primary language is visual rather than verbal, not necessarily people that might feel at home in the current 'art world' But then the Dharma is insisting that practising means us all becoming more creative on all levels. All Order members have a Sadhana even if, for various reasons they don't want to do a formal 'Visualisation' or feel that they are not suited? By definition we all follow a Path towards a goal otherwise we would be totally content with our current state and therefore in no need of the Dharma. So, we all engage in Sadhana in one way or another for beings 'image' their desires in order to be in relationship to them, which implies a way of realising those desires. There is also the process whereby we tend to gather around us objects or images that somehow remind us of those ideals that give our lives meaning.

The aim of the Padmaloka Project is to have the Shrine-room panelled with images - Not just pictures hanging on a wall like some natty 'Buddhist' art

gallery but literally a room panelled with Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and the like. So far, the only part of the project that is close to fulfilling that is the West wall with Amitabha flanked by Kshitigarbha and Avalokiteshvara plus the panels around the main window behind the Shakyamuni Rupa that show Dipankara and Maitreya, Buddha's of the distant past and future. Padmaloka is just embarking on the next instalment which entails linking the images around the entrance facing the Shakyamuni figure. In my research I keep coming across Shrine rooms where there are many small Buddha figures repeated as a pattern surrounding the main figures. I found images of some of the earliest repeat prints of small Buddhas where the printing was a devotional exercise and the results were placed inside Rupa's. From his pilgrimage in Japan Aryapala sent me photographs of a Shrine-room where donated Buddhist images covered the ceiling like tiles. These repeated images are regular features even in early Buddhist paintings which echo the relief panels decorating Stupas. There is an obvious parallel between the practise of continuous Mantra chanting and the repetition of small Buddha prints or paintings or even relief panels as a practice. The message is obvious, Absolute reality is everywhere permeating all of space (in a manner of speaking) the only thing that needs transforming is our perception. So, when thinking of incorporating multiple small Buddha images into the Shrine Project it seemed like an opportunity to open it up as a devotional practice to all who would like to participate. Over the years people often ask about tips for helping with so called 'visualisation' and one very simple practise is to take a line drawing of a Buddha or Bodhisattva and literally just colour it in. This demands no artistic skill beyond staying within the lines, if this is done in the right spirit with an open heart as a devotional practise the results can often be very effective. For one, working with colour on a significant form can open up other areas of consciousness, at the very least it helps to imprint the image in one's mind - not just a memory but an experience. The more times you do it then the more effective the process is. As Bhante points out in 'The Religion of Art' even the most rudimentary attempts at applying paint can enhance one's appreciation of Art. Unfortunately, some find the idea too simple to take seriously, thinking it smacks of infant school. This is probably because in a lot of modern education programmes 'art' classes are often abandoned beyond infant grades as the other topics are seen to be more 'important'. This is an extremely damaging aspect of modern education which I'm not going into here or I'll fill up the whole programme.

If enough people take up this opportunity to contribute it could be a significant part of the Shrine room, reflecting in a very graphic way the aspect of collective practice that the shrine room helps to facilitate. We will print off a basic image of the Buddha (based on one of the earliest examples of multiple block-printed images of the Buddha) - They will be printed onto small wooden

panels as a black line print on white. You can paint as simply or as ornately as you see fit. Obviously, there are basic colours associated with the form - ie Green head aura, Blue body aura etc... just try and paint with care and attention and it will reflect the rich variety of the movement united by the common ideal of the Going for Refuge. Together we are literally bringing the Buddha into existence - The collectivity of our individual efforts will create a significant contribution to the shrine room like an acting out of the Bodhicitta practice where the end result of individual effort creates something that goes far beyond the individual. I hope that as many people as possible attempt this simple practice so that the end result can reflect that in a very tangible fashion.

Aloka