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Reimagining Buddhism: Understanding Sangharakshita and His Teachings

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A Review of *Reimagining Buddhism: Understanding Sangharakshita and His Teachings*

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Reimagining Buddhism: Understanding Sangharakshita and His Teachings. By Vishvapani Blomfield. Cambridge: Windhorse Publications, 2025, ISBN Number 978-1-915342-45-4 (paperback), $22.95.

Sangharakshita (1925–2018) was born in London, lived as a Buddhist monk in India, and returned to the UK in 1964. He founded the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) in 1967, a new Buddhist movement that became Triratna in 2010, which today has Order members and friends world-wide. It is of course only once someone has died that it becomes possible to weigh up their life and contribution as a whole, and since Sangharakshita died in 2018, Nagabodhi (2023) has written a (popular rather than critical) biography of Sangharakshita and Robert Ellis (2020) a critical assessment of his ideas from the perspective of his own middle way philosophy.

Vishvapani's new book is neither a biography nor a critical assessment, but a sustained attempt simply to understand—to get inside and make sense of—a Buddhist teacher whose life and teachings are unusually independent and multi-faceted. It is unlikely that *Reimagining Buddhism*

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represents the last word on Sangharakshita, but Vishvapani's work is pioneering in that it identifies in a penetrating way what is distinctive about Sangharakshita's teaching, and some of the fundamental concerns, forces and themes that run through his life's work. There is a useful partial parallel in Daniel Stuart's (2020) introduction to S. N. Goenka: Stuart writes as a grateful student of Goenka, just as Vishvapani is likewise a disciple of Sangharakshita (albeit a cautious and skeptical one); like Stuart, Vishvapani has to write critically about his own teacher, and manages to do so honestly and clearly; and like Stuart, a major part of Vishvapani's aim is to be selective in order to draw out what is especially important in his teacher's approach.

In his introduction, Vishvapani identifies a golden thread running through the whole of Sangharakshita's thought: his approach to Buddhism as a living organism. Following this thread, the Dharma life becomes comparable to a process of organic growth. In this way, the theme of imagination becomes the key for unlocking the unity of Sangharakshita's thought. As Vishvapani writes, "this book approaches Sangharakshita as a symbolic, or imaginative, thinker" (11). It is a bold move to identify such a unifying feature of a thinker's work in the introduction, but Vishvapani manages to keep hold of this thread through the entire course of his study. Since, among the twenty-seven volumes of Sangharakshita's *Complete Works* (published 2016–24 by Windhorse) Sangharakshita himself nowhere admits that there is such a golden thread or unifying image, it is a considerable achievement for Vishvapani not only to have identified one, but to have been able to trace its influence right through Sangharakshita's teaching and life.

After the introduction, the book is arranged in four parts, each with several chapters. "Part One: Living in the Stream" is a chronological overview of Sangharakshita's life that focusses on particular moments in his earlier life to tease out distinctive elements of what Sangharakshita felt was important among his formative experiences. For example, Sangharakshita first glimpsed the figure of Padmasambhava in the form of a

large statue in a temple in Darjeeling in 1945 which, in his mind, came to symbolize the uncanny presence of the spiritual in the world, a presence whose influence never disappeared from Sangharakshita's life. At the same time, a sense of being an outsider also permeated his experience, which Vishvapani connects with his homosexuality (illegal at the time in both India and the UK). Vishvapani argues that Sangharakshita's discovery of Tibetan Buddhism during his years in Kalimpong, in the foothills of the Himalayas, allowed him to access higher levels of conscious experience, especially through his practice of Tantric *sādhana*.

Around the same time, Sangharakshita spent months each year lecturing and teaching new converts to Buddhism among Dr. Ambedkar's followers in Maharashtra. Sangharakshita returned to the UK in 1964 in response to an invitation from the English Sangha Trust, but his teaching became more innovative and less orthodox, and in 1966 the Trustees disinvited him. While Vishvapani relies on Sangharakshita's own account of this time, he also holds him partly responsible for the rift in a way that Sangharakshita himself only partly acknowledged, in that his teaching was obviously and deliberately not what the conservative Theravādins of the English Sangha Trust wanted.

Vishvapani goes on to evoke the extraordinary counter-cultural atmosphere of early FWBO, not only involving Sangharakshita's unconventional teachings, but his sexual experiments, his inspired talks on Padmasambhava, and the gradual formation around him of a committed group of young people. Vishvapani then leaps forward to more recent years, when Sangharakshita's sexual behavior became a topic of censure both inside and outside of his Order. Vishvapani does not excuse Sangharakshita, writing: "I find it hard to understand how he failed to anticipate that his sexual encounters would have powerful and unpredictable effects on at least some of his partners" (84). However, he also situates Sangharakshita's sexual life within the larger context of a spirit of creative exploration that characterized his Dharma teaching. Creativity and controversy were inseparable.

Vishvapani begins "Part Two: Imagining the Path" with Sangharakshita's comparison of consciousness to a vast, unknown subterranean chamber of which we ordinarily experience only a small sub-chamber. For Sangharakshita, this metaphor makes the Buddhist cosmos with its levels and realms more tangible and allows Vishvapani to introduce the idea of *hierarchy* in both cosmos and consciousness—of lower and higher levels—that is essential to Sangharakshita's conception of the Buddhist path as an *ascent*. Since boyhood Sangharakshita had connected with what he later called "the vertical dimension" (96) through poetry. His sense of *nirvāṇa* was as a presence in this world of such a higher dimension of consciousness which he called "transcendental," and in Mahāyāna texts like the Chinese *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* he found traditional expressions of the Dharma which put it in just this way. He particularly appreciated symbols like that of the lotus growing out of the mud and flowering into the open air, and this organic image of the path as vertical growth became central to his way of imagining Buddhism.

Vishvapani connects this transcendental dimension of Sangharakshita's thought with a similar emphasis found in the Romantic poetry of authors like Samuel T. Coleridge in which Sangharakshita had been immersed since childhood. For Coleridge and Sangharakshita, "organic understanding" involves the image of seed and plant for the unfolding of spiritual potential, and in Vishvapani's analysis of Sangharakshita's use of this image, the plant has many important facets: it involves growth, intrinsic to all things; its growth requires many supportive conditions, including for Buddhists spiritual friendship; a plant also has its own secret inner force; and the plant itself is an organic whole, and not the sum of its various parts. Vishvapani usefully contrasts Sangharakshita's use of Romantic symbolism and ideas with Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's (2015) relatively narrow critique of "Buddhist Romanticism" in its early German phase, showing how Sangharakshita drew more on its later artistic phase, especially from English poets like Shelley and Keats.

Vishvapani then spends the whole of chapter 6 making a close reading of a long poem, "The Veil of Stars," written 1951–54, in which Sangharakshita, then a monastic, writes of the transformation of unrequited love into *bodhicitta*. Vishvapani draws out how the poem draws on Plato's *Symposium* and the Neoplatonic appreciation of beauty, which Sangharakshita found reflected in Buddhism (as in the Buddha's teaching on beauty to his cousin Nanda). Imagination was thus a key faculty for Buddhist spiritual life in Sangharakshita's teaching.

"Part Three: Tracing the Path" concerns the way Sangharakshita engaged with Buddhist doctrine, more or less eschewing traditional interpretations, and instead re-imagining them inspired by the image of organic growth. Vishvapani's aim in this part would seem to be to faithfully summarize the complex originality of Sangharakshita's ideas in a kind of systematic theology, whereas in my own work ("Preconditions"; "Niyamas"; and "Buddhist Modernist") I take a more critical scholarly approach revealing some of the modernist innovations involved. Sangharakshita was never able to identify himself with any particular Buddhist school but instead saw the teaching of each as pointing to an essence that remained beyond expression.

Sangharakshita's *magnum opus*, his 1957 *A Survey of Buddhism*, sets out his understanding of Buddhism as an organic whole, its different schools representing different approaches to a transcendental core. In this work, the aforementioned image of organic growth is applied to the historical development of Buddhism. Sangharakshita fully accepts the historical method of modern scholarship and therefore revises the traditional Buddhist story of the relationship of (so-called) Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna.

Vishvapani manages a dense presentation of key features of Sangharakshita's revisionist account of Buddhism based around the centrality of going for refuge, as well as concisely indicating how Sangharakshita claimed no special authority for his revisions except his own personal experience. Vishvapani goes on to summarize some key doctrinal features

of Sangharakshita's teaching, in his presentation of conditionality in both cyclical and progressive forms, and his advocacy of Mrs. Rhys Davids' scheme of the five *niyama*s for putting the Dharma into dialogue with the scientific worldview. Vishvapani goes on to trace how Sangharakshita's teaching, after he returned to the West, unfolded more practical engagements with the same core approach. He compared the practice of the path to the organic growth of a plant, with a practitioner growing and changing at every stage. In the 1960s and 70s Sangharakshita even began to speak of the Buddhist path as a "higher evolution," in a re-imagining of scientific ideas. But Vishvapani emphasizes how this was more of skillful means than serious theory and succeeds in showing how Sangharakshita's various ways of conceptualizing the path are different versions of the metaphor of organic growth.

In "Part Four: Creating a Movement," Vishvapani reflects on the FWBO, later Triratna, the movement Sangharakshita founded. He notes how Vangisa, one of the first Order members, compared it to a seed being planted; Sangharakshita compares going for refuge to the blood circulating in an organism; and practicing the precepts to the extension of going for refuge into a practitioner's whole life. Vishvapani shows how Sangharakshita set up the movement in a decentralized way, like a community of living beings.

In a particularly interesting final section, Vishvapani compares Triratna to some other Buddhist movements in the West. He begins with an interesting contrast between Sangharakshita's evolving movement and the emerging western Buddhism envisaged by Joseph Goldstein in *One Dharma* (2002). While Goldstein sees Buddhism adapted to Western culture, based on the pragmatic question of what works, Sangharakshita prefers to envisage Western culture as becoming adapted to Buddhism. In this vision, Triratna would be a world within the Western world, more like a rebirth of traditional Buddhist culture, one in which every aspect of life has a transcendent dimension. Such a vision of Buddhism in the West is obviously not the kind of pragmatic secular Buddhism that characterizes

the *vipassanā* movement. However, Vishvapani points out that the *vipassanā* movement, closely aligned with liberal values, has had a much greater effect than Triratna.

Vishvapani also compares Sangharakshita with Chögyam Trungpa, whose "crazy wisdom" he sees as an extreme kind of counter-culture. Interestingly, Vishvapani notes that Sangharakshita did not criticize Trungpa's excesses on secular grounds but instead acknowledged the complexity of his personality. In this way, Vishvapani implicitly excuses Sangharakshita's mistakes on the same grounds of complexity and genius that Sangharakshita excuses Trungpa. Finally, Vishvapani also perceives a difference of emphasis in relation to Thich Nhat Hahn and his Order of Interbeing in that Sangharakshita preferred to talk of hierarchy and development rather than the "Rousseau-ism" of inherent goodness.

Vishvapani concludes that Sangharakshita's ambitions were always greater than his effect, and that the falling out with the English Sangha Trust in 1966, his abrasive style, and his views on women did not make things easier. But, as Vishvapani makes clear, his distinctive approach deserves wider attention. *Reimagining Buddhism* is the first attempt to consider the whole of Sangharakshita's lifework, and it does so by way of snapshots and highlights from different areas of his life, a method that is more intimate than generalization. But the identification of the image of organic growth as an organizing principle is Vishvapani's distinctive contribution. It allows the reader to make sense of Sangharakshita's achievement as a complex living whole, and to appreciate his distinctive achievement in translating Buddhism into contemporary Western culture.

Vishvapani's approach is not a critique of Sangharakshita, nor really an attempt at criticism. Rather, it represents an attempt to draw out, from the inside, what is distinctive about Sangharakshita's teaching in an original way. The success of his work lies in how it allows a new and much more complete perspective on Sangharakshita. It will be invaluable not only within the Triratna community, but also for scholars working on

modern Western Buddhism as it provides an accessible framework for understanding the images and intuitions underlying Sangharakshita's transmission of Buddhism to the West.

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