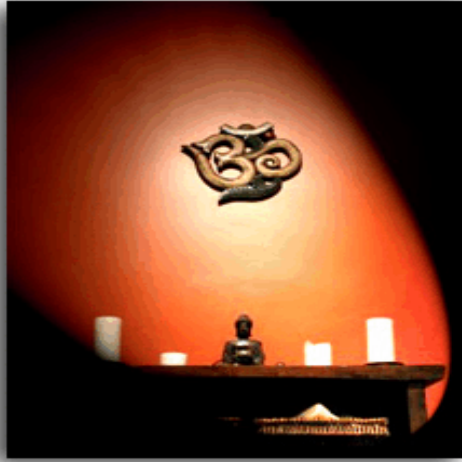


IBMC Monthly Guide - January, 2007



Happy New Year

Ven. Man-Giac Dies

We are sorry to inform you that the Most Venerable Thich Man-Giac, Supreme Abbot of the Vietnamese temple of Los Angeles, died in late October. He had been ill for the past two years. Two years ago he had a mild stroke, which left him with some speech impediment. But his death came about from a malignant tumor in his brain. First he had radiation to shrink its size and then had it surgically removed in April.

He was a close friend of our Abbess, Ven. Dr. Karuna Dharma, and was the best friend of IBMC's founder, Ven. Dr. Thich Thien-An. They had been friends since their childhood.

He was born in a village next to the ancient Buddhist capital of Hue, Vietnam, and attended monk's school in Hue. He received his BA in Buddhism from the sammonks' college where Dr. Thich Thien-An received his. Later when Dr. Thien-An was in Tokyo working on his D.Litt degree, he arranged for his old friend to do the same. Then when Thien-An returned to Saigon as a professor in Buddhism at Saigon University, he also arranged for Man-Giac to do the same. Ven. Man-Giac rose in stature until he became a dean at University of Saigon and at Van Hanh University, which was founded by Ven. Thich Thien-An, and Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh.

When Saigon fell to the Communists in 1975, he and all other Buddhist leaders remained, on the order of the Supreme Patriarch, who said they would be needed by the people. But after two years, with himself being in constant danger of being imprisoned for his stance against the new government, he finally acceded to his friends' urgings and sailed by a small fishing boat to Malaysia. In 1977 Ven. Thien-An and Ven. Karuna went to Malaysia to see him in the refugee camp and began to make preparations for his coming to the States. He flew to France on Ven. Nhat Hanh's urging and from there with the assistance of the AFL-CIO came to Los Angeles, where he served as Abbot of Chua Vietnam.

In America he spent his time helping new refugees to nLos Angeles and built the national Vietnamese Buddhist associations.

We will miss you tremendously, VeiationWe will miss you terribly Hoa Thoung.

108 Bows Ceremony

Rev. Maha Candana will be leading the 108 Bows ceremony every Sunday at 10 am until monks' training begins in May . The ceremony begins at 10 am and is a good prelude for Sunday service. In it we pay homage to the 88 known Buddhas and renew our precepts. Please join us.

Ordination Ceremony, 12/10

On Sunday, December 10, Sr. Candana became Rev. Maha Candana in a ceremony that utilized the presence of all IBMC monks, nuns and Dharma teachers. The 12 preceptors together gave her ordination and Romeo Kassarian Refuge, as an upasaka (layman) with the religious name of Samma Vayama (Right Effort), a name chosen by Rev. Candana. He bears the name Candana as his last name since she is his primary teacher.

It was a very solemn ceremony, but with some funny episodes as well. You will be able to recognized Rev. Maha Candana Karuna (Great Sandalwood Compassion) by her brown robe with the brown collar (not yellow, which is worn only by fully ordained Zen Dharma Teachers).

We extend a hearty welcome to Rev. Maha Candana and Mr. Samma Vayama Candana for their recent step in the Sangha.

New Mailing List

If you have not yet told us you want to remain on our 2007 mail listing, do it by January 10 or you may be dropped from receiving our Monhly Guides, You can either send us the envelope, or call or email us.

Om Mani Padme Hum - a talk given by Rev. Jñana Karuna Vajra at IBMC

Om Mani Padme Hum. At every morning service we chant mul-tiple times this familiar and comforting mantra. There's something about both the sound of it and the experience of chanting it that conveys a sense of heightened spirituality and religious devotion. Indeed, many people in the west with no obvious allegiance to Buddhism will admit to some sense of recognition at the sound or sight of the syllables Om Mani Padme Hum. For some time now I've wanted to know more about the background of this beautiful mantra. I had no inkling as to how or why these six syllables orig-inated nor what meaning was behind them that they should be-come so integrally identified with Buddhist practice. I also had no idea of the extraordinary significance attached by early Mahayana Buddhism to these few syllables.

Anyone who has had the good fortune to travel to Tibet knows that in Tibetan Buddhist culture, the formula or mantra of Om Mani Padme Hum is ubiquitous: it is the most important mantra associ-ated with the bodhisattva Avalokitea'vara, the Buddhist equiv-alent of the patron deity of Tibet. Written representations of the mantra are a prominent visual

feature of the landscape, carved and painted onto the rocks that line a road or a path, written in letters high up on a hillside, as well as inscribed on huge walls made out of rock, so called mani-walls. In most instances, Om Mani Padme Hum is the mantra that, in printed form, fills the prayer wheels of the Tibetan religious world. As the mantra is omni present in written images it is equally present on the lips of the devout practitioners in all manner of religious practices, both public and private. However, the importance of Om Mani Padme Hum was established well before the introduction of Buddhism in to Tibet. Most of our story focuses on this development, but before we get to those details a bit of historical context helps set the stage.

The 4th and 5th centuries C.E. in India were a period of religious transition. Buddhism, which had been the predominant faith, was slowly being eclipsed by the Hindu revival under the Gupta dynasty. The two religions, while competing with one another did not hesitate to borrow from the other to bolster their belief systems and practices. For instance, many of the Jataka Tales, which are birth stories detailing previous lives of the Buddha and his followers, are based on Indian folk tales but adapted by the Buddhists for their purposes. These historic Indian folk tales were most often passed down orally in the puranas, which were primarily extended verses, containing legendary and mythological versions of the creation, history and destruction of the universe, with its divine, human and subhuman inhabitants. The puranas are traditionally grouped into three categories, according to the aspect of God they gave worship, Vishnu, Shiva, or Brahma. The puranas were also a formative influence on certain Buddhist sutras. One of these puranas, the Skanda Purana, was of significant influence in the composition of the late Mahayana sutra in which the mantra Om Mani Padme Hum first appears. More about this sutra in a moment; let's first take a brief look at the role of the Skanda Purana in leading us up to Om Mani Padme Hum.

The complicated narrative of the Skanda Purana concerns us less than the purana's discussion of the importance of the great five syllable mantra in homage of Shiva, Namah Shivaya. This phrase is a form of verbal honor and adoring submission or surrender to the deity. The Sanskrit root nam means to bow or to bend. We are more familiar with this in the variant greeting expression of namaste, literally honor unto thee.

Linguistic interests aside, what most concerns us about Namah Shivaya are the manifold virtues it represents. The Skanda describes it variously as "the greatest of all mantras", "the bestower of salvation on those who repeatedly mutter it." Even Brahma is unable to describe its greatness. By means of this formula, or mantra, "all sages attained the Supreme Brahman, free from all ailments." Continuing, it is considered "the supreme king of all the mantras", "the storehouse of all spiritual knowledge" and the "illuminating lamp on the path of salvation." There are further attributes, but these examples convey the power of the mantra as being in and of itself a means of attaining liberation. This notion will reoccur when we consider the origins of Om Mani Padme Hum.

Let's return to that very subject. I mentioned earlier a relatively late Mahayana sutra. This sutra, the Karandavyuha Sutra, provides the earliest textual source for our six (not five) syllable mantra, was most likely composed in Kashmir at around the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century C.E. It is a composite work consisting of stories, as well as doctrinal and ethical teachings, gathered together and placed within the "casket", or the karanda identified in the first half of its title. The sutra is almost wholly devoted to glorifying and developing the cult of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. The second half of its title, the word vyaha is used in the sense of a magnificent array, thus reflecting the fact that the extended title of the sutra suggests a gathering or array of the qualities of this Bodhisattva.

The first section of the Karandavyuha details the various inspiring deeds and qualities of

Avalokites'vara. It is in the central section of the second part of the sutra that extensive attention is paid to promoting the recitation of the syllables Om Mani Padme Hum as a particular s'vara might be invoked. The mantra is first introduced, primarily indirectly, as the means by which people may be born into the worlds contained within the hair pores of Avalokites'vara. The story about the mantra opens with a bodhi-sattva who is among the gathering in the Jetavana grove asks Shakyamuni how he might obtain this formula. (This bodhisattva's name has 22 letters in it so I won't even try to pronounce it.) Put very briefly, the Buddha's reply consists of a long description of the many extraordinary benefits of reciting the six syllables, together with an account of the search for the formula made by the Tathagata Padmottama. The bodhisattva with the unpronounceable name is taken on a tour of the worlds contained within the aforementioned hair pores of Avalokites'vara. Each hair pore is individually named. Within them is revealed Avalokites'vara's thousand-fold nature. The Buddha then announces that whoever brings to mind the six-syllable formula will be born in these pores, never again to wander in samsara, traveling from one pore to the next until nirvana is attained. It is interesting to note here that a portion of the 1st century C.E. Avatamsaka sutra provides a more elaborate account of multiple and more fantastic buddhalands contained in the hair pores of another famous Mahayana Bodhisattva Samantabhadra. This aspect of that earlier sutra clearly influenced the Karandavyuha. But only in the Karandavyuha sutra is it acknowledged that the worlds contained within the hair pores of Avalokites'vara and the appearance of his thousandfold form constitute the components of a vision of the bodhisattva brought about through the recitation of Om Mani Padme Hum.

With the emphasis that the Karandavyuha places on the mantra it is interesting that the actual six syllables appear only twice in the entire text of the sutra. Most of the time the mantra is referred to by a Sanskrit phrase meaning six-syllable great formula. Considering the profound outcomes attributed to reciting the mantra, referring to it merely as the 'great formula' seems to grossly understate its effect. Specifically, the mantra is to bring about liberation. Bringing it to mind leads to the destruction of all evil and the attainment of enlightenment. Whoever is given solace by Om Mani Padme Hum is said to become an irreversible bodhisattva, and, before long, a fully enlightened buddha. Reciting the mantra is said to be the cause of the destruction of rebirth in the five realms of aamaara, leading to the drying up of the klesas or defilements of greed, hatred and delusion. Whoever writes Om Mani Padme Hum is said to have written "the eighty-four thousand dharmas", short-hand for the idea of the complete Buddhist literary corpus. The formula is also said to be the means by which "the twelvefold wheel of Dharma is turned."

Clearly the six-syllable Om Mani Padme Hum has been characterized in the sutra with the same extravagant type of language that was used in the earlier purana praising the five-syllable Namaha Shivaya. The attribution of such extraordinary powers to words is but reflective of the magical value attributed to language in early cultures and is common in both Hindu and Buddhist sacred texts. The Buddhist text not only is emulative of the Hindu text but also engages in some not so subtle religious one-upmanship. The attributes of Avalokites'vara are frequently identical to those attributed to Shiva and in many instances the implication is that Avalokites'vara is superior to Shiva, as well as superior to all Buddhist deities. A final comparison between the characterizations of the Hindu five-syllable mantra and the Buddhist six-syllable mantra can be found in contrasting invocations of nature. Namaha Shivaya, as both the essence and source of all things, is repeatedly described as the seed of a banyan tree. Om Mani Padme Hum is said to be like a grain of rice, including one description as "the grain of rice of the Mahayana." It is both the regenerative seed, like the Banyan seed, but also the essential, nourishing part of the plant. The formulation and propagation of the mantra Om Mani Padme Hum occurred not only in a larger Indian historical religious context but also in a larger Mahayana Buddhist context. Earlier I mentioned that throughout the Karandavyuha Sutra our mantra is referred to as the

six-syllable great formula. In the Sanskrit word for great formula mahavidya, the second element of vidya refers to knowledge, specifically in terms to a type of mantra. Such a mantra, as we have seen with Om Mani Padme Hum, is said to be capable of bringing about both magical effects and enlightenment itself. Earlier Buddhist texts refer to another mantra we regularly recite as being such a vidya: Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha. These words, of course, appear at the end of the Heart Sutra. Not incidentally, the five-syllable Hindu mantra is also referred to as a vidya, and it and Om Mani Padme Hum are said to be of the heart; in the case of Om Mani Padme Hum, of the innermost heart. Until the appearance of Karandavyuha Sutra the notion of a concise formula of six syllables providing the ability to attain all religious goals and, as the essence and source of all religious teaching, was not part of orthodox Mahayana doctrine. What the sutra does, in order to integrate this concept into the Mahayana system, is to present the formula in the same terms used to describe the Perfection of Wisdom (the Prajnaparamita) in the earlier Perfection of Wisdom sutras. Om Mani Padme Hum, the sutra implies, has taken the place of the Perfection of Wisdom as the supreme principle of the Mahayana. The recitation of the mantra is believed to lead, automatically, to the accomplishment of the six perfections. Even so, the sutra is not suggesting that Om Mani Padme Hum makes the Perfection of Wisdom redundant, but clearly implies that the mantra is not simply equivalent to the Prajnaparamita, but is, in some ways, superior to it. Finally, in doctrinal terms, and put very simply, the sutra emphasizes the notion that the persistent use of Om Mani Padme Hum will lead to rebirth in Sukhavati, the pure land of the Buddha Amitabha, from where enlightenment is an easy step. In fact, experiencing the cosmic lord Avalokites'vara is to be understood as inseparable from the experience of rebirth in the pure land of the Buddha. In considering the meaning of our six-syllable mantra we need to consider the meaning of the word "mantra" itself. Etymologically, a mantra is an instrument of the mind, a tool for doing something with the mind. What is most important then about any mantra is its function rather than its meaning. As one writer has put it, "a mantra is always a source of activity; it is always a potential means of achieving a special effect." A contemporary Tibetan lama describes a mantra as "a series of syllables whose power resides in its sound, through the repeated pronouncing of which one can obtain control of a given form of energy." In the case of Om Mani Padme Hum this energy is conceived of as the power of Avalokites'vara. In one sense, the mantra is said to be a means both of entering into the presence of Avalokites'vara and of appropriating some of the Bodhisattva's power. One of the defining characteristics of this Bodhisattva is compassion and appropriation of some of his power is to be connected with an increase of this quality. Likewise, since Avalokites'vara is a repository of immense amounts of merit, recitation of the six-syllable formula is said to result in the accumulation of immeasurable merit in similar fashion. Thus, on a broad conceptual level, the "meaning" of Om Mani Padme Hum represents a means by which the intellect may be involved in the integration of the individual with the energy of Avalokites'vara through the use of the mantra. Alexander Studholme, whose 2002 book on the origins of Om Mani Padme Hum provided the basis for this talk writes:

"The power of a mantra is said to lie in its sound. The purely sonic or musical dimension of Avalokites'vara's formula should not, then, go overlooked. Indeed, it is surely not insignificant that the arrangement of the six syllables 'om-ma-ni-pa-dme-hum' does yield a naturally pleasing reverberation when recited. The sounds of the syllables 'om' and 'hum', at the beginning and end of the formula, tend to merge together into a continuous hum, while the four middle syllables bring a certain liveliness and movement to this single tone....when Om Manipadme Hum was first wrought within the inspired mind of a Buddhist [sage], the sound of the compound manipadme, as well as its meaning, is likely to have contributed to its inclusion in the formula."

After all of this it is not altogether surprising that there has never been concrete agreement on the exact meaning of each of the six syllables, with the greatest confusion about the

middle four. Neither Om- nor Hum- have any intrinsic semantic meaning but they possess great symbolic import. Since these two syllables begin and end many mantras their use may well derive from the same use that is made of the two similar syllables A- and -Ham, being the first and last letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. A- and -Ham together make up the word aham, conveying "I". The use of those two syllables at either end of a mantra, then, conveys a sense of both the identity and the all-inclusive nature of the mind engaged in mantric utterance. Scholars have engaged in considerable mental gymnastics over the ages about the exact meaning of the central syllables of the mantra. What does seem clear, particularly when interpreting the words in light of the Mahayana scriptures, is a meaning reflecting the central features of the Mahayana vision, the "jewel-lotus" or "lotus made of jewels". Given the predominance in the Mahayana of the religious goal of lotus is apparently semantically incorrect. However, it does, like competing interpretations, make sense in that it is appropriate to an understanding of the function of the formula and assists in "the turning of the twelvefold wheel of Dharma."

January Prison Dharma / A column devoted to the writings of prisoners from around the country.

Dear Venerable Dr. Karuna Dharma:

Greetings and how ya doing? From waking to sleeping, my days ripen as well as I could ask. . .which is pretty darn great. Sitting here in the half-dark, thinking, thinking, thinking about what is relevant enough to write.

stopped there & was doing it again. Because it is a curious relationship: you and your monastics, in your compassion for those who insist on creating their own suffering, provide this wealth of scripture and helpful guidance in the understanding thereof, so that we may clean our minds of this silliness and embrace the sorrow and laughter and awareness of our faulty behavior for the truth of our present being.

And what do I do? Sit here, pondering how much letter I am obligated to write in return, trying to make sure I sound sufficiently "with it" and realized enough to warrant new and subtle teachings. Greedy & grasping. And still Tao.

Dayroom voices, clomp of bootheels. The crowd noise of football on the dayroom TV. All of a sudden, violent elation over a fumble. Now anger and disappointment over a disagreeable ruling. Just like Sundays at my family's home.

I struggle when answering the questions. There is the desire to supplement this with some kind of intuitive interpretation that will surely demonstrate my mastery of the application of the teaching. Both are rooted in selfishness: the former to be "done" with the "task" and know the accomplishment of scholarly study; and with the latter, obviously to reassure the ego sense that I am well along the way in realization of the True Face.

And then I really pay attention and become
smell of sticky ink
and melting
soft spear of graphite into the page.

Yours in the Dharma, Ian

Ironwall Junction, by John

Madness swirling,
 Gaining in mass. . .
broken souls screaming
 from insanities sheen. . .
Criminal Justice wields
 the political potion. . .
Perverse leaders delight
 in the machine's lucrative lotion. . .
Society appeased
 through cement and steel. . .
human warehouses
 filled to the brim. . .
wayward sons receive their predestined plight
 stung with horrors, pain and fright. . .
As always, karma encompasses
 enfolds, then sets free.

January Events

Sunday Talks

1/7 - Starting the New Year - 11 am - Ven. Karuna Dharma

11/14 - From Mira to Maitri Dasi - 11am - Rev. Thich Tam Xa, Maitri Dasi

11/21 - Buddhist Books 11am Rev. Maha Candana

1/28 - The Development of the -11am - Buddha Image - Thich Tam Thi, Rev. Vajra Karuna,

Classes at IBMC

Tues - Fundamentals of Buddhism - 7 pm - Rev. Hanasi Karuna, Ananda Hall

Wed - Every Day Buddhism - 7 pm - Rev. Kusala Ratna Karuna, Zendo

Fri - Sitting Meditation - 7:30 - Rev. Kusala Ratna Karuna

Special Events

1/7 - 108 Bows Ceremony - 10 am - Rev. Maha Candana Karuna

Meditation - Wednesday nights, 7-9 pm - led by Rev. Kusala Ratna Karuna

Friday nights, 7:30-9 pm, led by Rev. Kusala Ratna Karuna

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