General Introduction to Sangharakshita's Seminars

Hidden Treasure

From the mid-seventies through to the mid-eighties, Urgyen Sangharakshita led many seminars on a wide range of texts for invited groups of Order members and Mitras. These seminars were highly formative for the FWBO/Triratna as Sangharakshita opened up for the still very young community what it might mean to live a life in the Dharma.

The seminars were all recorded and later transcribed. Some of these transcriptions have been carefully checked and edited and are now available in book form. However, a great deal of material has so far remained unchecked and unedited and we want to make it available to people who wish to deepen their understanding of Sangharakshita's presentation of the Dharma.

How should one approach reading a seminar transcription from so long ago? Maybe the first thing to do is to vividly imagine the context. What year is it? Who is present? We then step into a world in which Sangharakshita is directly communicating the Dharma. Sometimes he is explaining a text, at other times he is responding to questions and we can see how the emergence of Dharma teachings in this context was a collaborative process, the teaching being drawn out by the questions people asked. Sometimes those questions were less to do with the text and arose more from the contemporary situation of the emerging new Buddhist movement.

Reading through the transcripts can be a bit like working as a miner, sifting through silt and rubble to find the real jewels. Sometimes the discussion is just a bit dull. Sometimes we see Sangharakshita trying to engage with the confusion of ideas many of us brought to Buddhism, confusion which can be reflected in the texts themselves. With brilliant flashes of clarity and understanding, we see him giving teachings in response that have since become an integral part of the Triratna Dharma landscape.

Not all Sangharakshita's ways of seeing things are palatable to modern tastes and outlook. At times some of the views captured in these transcripts express attitudes and ideas Triratna has acknowledged as unhelpful and which form no part of our teaching today. In encountering all of the ideas contained in over seventeen million words of Dharma investigation and exchange, we are each challenged to test what is said in the fire of our own practice and experience; and to talk over 'knotty points' with friends and teachers to better clarify our own understanding and, where we wish to, to decide to disagree.

We hope that over the next years more seminars will be checked and edited for a wider readership. In the meantime we hope that what you find here will inspire, stimulate, encourage - and challenge you in your practice of the Dharma and in understanding more deeply the approach of Urgyen Sangharakshita.

Sangharakshita's Literary Executors and the Adhisthana Dharma Team

Nanamoli XI: Tuscany 1986

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS on NANAMOLI'S LIFE OF THE BUDDHA, Ch. XI

Tuscany, 1986

PRESENT: The Venerable Sangharakshita, Vessantara, Uttara, Sudhana, Sumana, Cittapala, Jayamati, Sanghapala, Chakkhupala, Dharmamati, Ratnaprabha, Padmapani, Douglas Ponton, Duncan Steen, Peter Nicholson, Paul Tozer, Alan Pendock, Ben Murphy, Ong Sin Choon, Alan Turner, Kevin Donovan, Derek Goodman, Colin Lavender, Thomas McGeary, Gerd Baak. [New Order Members' names not available.)

10 November 1986

Vessantara: So today, Bhante, we have our third(?) session on the chapter from Nanamoli on 'The Person'... we've collected about nine questions. We will start with one or two on technical matters. Chakkhupala? According to my notes, you've got a question on 'giving, control, restraint'.

Chakkhupala: Ah, thank you, yes... We couldn't find out what those three words were, translations of: the triad 'giving, control, restraint'. What was a little confusing was that 'control' and 'restraint' are very close in meaning in English. I wondered if you were familiar with that triad and could throw any light on the separation of meanings in Buddhism.

S: I can't remember. One would have to look at the original text and then look in the Pali Dictionary. Sometimes one finds, in these sort of works, two adjectives or two nouns used of more or less the same meaning, and sometimes it is only later in the history of Buddhism that a distinct technical meaning is assigned to each. I am afraid we would have to wait until we got our hands on the original text to check that. I imagine, even in Pali, 'restraint' and 'control' are quite closely connected, Whatever the originals might be. But make a note of that. As soon as you do get access to a Pali Dictionary every self-respecting community should have one! just look it up. You will need, of course, the Pali text of that passage, won't you? You can get at that quite easily, because we have a more or less complete set at Padmaloka.

Ratnaprabha: This is another question about technical terms. There are a pair of terms called 'heart deliverance' and 'understanding deliverance' in this translation ceto-vimutti and panna-vimutti.

S: That must be, yes.

Ratnaprabha: I have come across these terms quite often in the Pali Canon, but I am not quite sure exactly what they refer to and how they are distinguished from each other.

S: This doesn't seem at all clear. Sometimes it is explained as meaning that ceto-vimutti is full experience of the jhanas, both lower and higher, whereas panna-vimutti is the attainment of full Insight. But there seems also to be an interpretation I am not completely clear about this but there seems to be an interpretation which suggests that ceto-vimutti indicates the exhaustion of the asravas by their not being [2] supplied with any fresh material; as if to say you stay on these dhyanic planes for so long that you are no longer generating fresh unskilful

karma, so that you attain liberation in that way. Whereas prajna-vimutti or panna-vimutti represents more a sort of cutting through the defilements by means of Insight. But I must admit I have not gone thoroughly into the question of the distinction between these two terms, which as I said does not seem very clear anyway; so those remarks must be regarded as only provisional.

Ratnaprabha: Does this imply that these are two different routes to liberation rather than two aspects of one liberation, then?

S: Yes and no; because you can have prajna, Insight, without experience of all the dhyanas, so in that sense without the experience of ceto-vimutti; but on the other hand, if you have attained liberation in any way, whether by ceto-vimutti or prajna-vimutti, surely there must be Insight of a kind; even if it is not the Insight that is actually cutting through it will be the Insight, so to speak, that has cut through. Though there is a Pali term ubhayo-vimutti(?), which means liberated both ways that is to say via ceto-vimutti and prajna-vimutti. I think some authorities would say that full and complete liberation is attainable either by prajna-vimutti or by ubhayo-vimutti, but not by ceto-vimutti by itself; but in that case ceto-vimutti would be regarded merely as experience of the jhanas without liberation in the full sense. The term vimutti is used quite loosely, sometimes; for instance, the samaya-vimutti which is usually translated as 'temporary vimutti'. In a way, that is a contradiction in terms. The commentaries explain it simply as the temporary experience of the dhyanas. So there is not complete clarity with regard to the actual meaning of those terms, as far as I have been able to make out.

Ratnaprabha: Bhante, in the Udana one of the suttas talks about Meghiya, and the term used there quite often through it is what Meghiya should do for 'the heart's release', and it gives five different progressive practices that he should follow. So this presumably is ceto-vimutti again, and it has been translated as 'the heart's release'.

S: Yes, that must be ceto-vimutti.

Ratnaprabha: But, in that case, it includes practices like developing spiritual friendship and so on; it doesn't seem to just emphasize dhyana.

S: Well, perhaps spiritual friendship can lead to dhyana! But one mustn't forget also the Udana you did say the Udana?

Ratnaprabha: Yes.

S: Yes, the Udana is quite an early text. Well, I must be careful what I say: it is an early text in the sense that it seems to reflect a very early version of the teaching, when perhaps terms which later became technical terms hadn't been very closely defined and were used more in a general literary sense. It is interesting that you can translate ceto-vimutti as 'heart's release'. If you translate it in that way, it does have a certain imprecision, but none the less it does communicate something. Perhaps it does correspond I have made this suggestion, before, I think to something very much like the removal of the klesa varana and the jneya varana in the Mahayana: that is to say, the removal of the veil of defilements what does Guenther call that? what does he call klesa? conflicting emotions, on the one hand, and jneya varana on the other, the veil of what does he call that? wrong ideas [3] about reality, or words to that effect. It is as

though ceto-vimutti could be regarded as the emotional, or emotive, aspect of liberation, and panna-vimutti as its intellectual. It looks something like that. Perhaps we, or the Buddhist tradition in general, is trying to assign a technical meaning to terms which at the beginning did not possess a precise technical significance.

Ratnaprabha: So does this mean that the term ceto, which I understand is basically the same as the word citta, tends to refer to the emotions in particular?

S: No; I don't think we can say that. I don't think we really have in Pali, anyway, that sort of distinction between emotions and reason that we have in English. There are contexts in which citta seems to be best translated as 'mind', and contexts in which it seems to be best translated as 'heart'. Perhaps the fact that we do distinguish so closely between emotion and reason does say something about us.

Vessantara (almost inaudible): One suggestion which ... the exhaustion of the asravas ... impression that you have stayed in dhyana so long that your previous karma has been exhausted.

S: Well, no, not that your previous karma has been exhausted so much as that you are not your karmas are exhausted but what makes karma is exhausted; because even after attaining liberation you may have to suffer the results of previous karma. But you are not it is as though, at least for the time being, there is a sort of pause in which there is no experience of the defilements. They sort of tail off, and when that happens, you are liberated, and that is irreversible if it is in fact liberation in the full sense, which seems to be doubtful.

Vessantara: ... experience of ... the mundane ... necessarily ...

S: It is not the experience of them but the cessation, in a sense, of the experience of them that is the condition precedent for the experience of vimutti. It is as though there is no longer any experience of the defilements. It is as though the defilements don't have a sort of base any more. But then, this is on the assumption that vimutti, in the compound ceto-vimutti, does indicate vimutti in the full sense. That seems to be doubtful. But there seems to be no doubt that panna-vimutti is vimutti in the full sense, and no doubt that ubhayo-vimutti is vimutti in the full sense. But ceto-vimutti does remain at least a trifle ambiguous. Once again, one could consult the Pali Dictionary, and then just follow up all the references to particular passages and see whether one can arrive at a definite meaning. It did, just as I was speaking, occur to me that it could have been that ceto-vimutti was the original term, and there, in this context, vimutti did mean liberation in the full sense; but that the distinction between panna-vimutti and ceto-vimutti might have been a later refinement. When that distinction was made, ceto-vimutti lost something of its original meaning. But that is just speculation. Anyway, what practical value does the question have for us?

Vessantara: I suppose it ... You've got several ways of approaching the spiritual ... certain very good conditions in quite a period of time, and I suppose this can in a way ... use that ... by itself, and ... perhaps not being such good conditions but working ...

S: Yes. There does seem to be some such correspondence.

Ratnaprabha: Can I just adjust your microphone ... ? (Makes adjustment.) Sorry about that.

Uttara: This isn't exactly a question that has come out of the book, it is just a question that sort of occurred to me, but it is relevant, I think. In the Basic Puja, there is the verse: The Buddha was a man. Sometimes we use it as: The Buddha was born, as we are born, when there are women around, not to offend them, but usually it's The Buddha was a man as we are men. What I derive from that statement I think this is what it's getting at is that the Buddha was, I don't know whether just a man, but the Buddha was man, he was born a man; there wasn't anything special, right? But the impression one gets from the Scriptures from, say, his previous lives and various things is it says that the Buddha in his previous lives was a Bodhisattva or he descended from whatever realm, so when he was born he made so many steps and then pronounced that he was going to attain Enlightenment. To me, that doesn't sound just like your average man in the street, in a way.

S: So far as we know!

Uttara: So is it worth looking at the Buddha I think you once said Christians sometimes say: 'Oh well, the Buddha was a good man but Jesus Christ was of divine origin' or something; but I think what I am trying to get at is that the Buddha, too, OK, maybe in one of his previous lives started off as just a man, but I think through his lives you see that he was, it seems as though he was a Bodhisattva, which seems different from just being a man? Do you see what I'm getting at?

S: Well, there is the point this is the main point, I think that in the Buddhist Scriptures there seem to be different strata, some older than others; and in what appear to be the oldest strata the Buddha is referred to simply as a human being, without all the legends, as one might call them, which seem to have developed later on. For instance, you mention the Buddha having been a Bodhisattva; well, in what seem to be the earlier parts of the Pali Scriptures, the term Bodhisattva is used only for the Buddha before he gained Enlightenment in this life; and we are not really told anything about even his early life in this birth, apart from that incident under the jambu tree. There certainly seems, in the earliest parts of the Pali Canon, to be no reference to his having descended from the Tusita devaloka or anything like that. So we are at liberty to regard those as later, as it were, more devotional developments. If we don't do that and, of course, many Buddhists don't if we accept those later accounts of the prior Bodhisattva career, so that we regard the Buddha as having been born in this life literally on the threshold of Enlightenment, i.e. having to take only just the last few steps, then obviously there can be no comparison with ourselves; because we, as far as we know, aren't in that position. But, from a purely practical point of view, it does seem to offer us more encouragement if we think that the Buddha started off more or less from scratch in this life. None the less, that doesn't resolve the question quite so easily, because one certainly does find that people, say even those coming into contact with the FWBO, in some cases respond in a very decisive manner, as though a seed had already been sown, whereas others hardly respond at all, or respond very little indeed. So sometimes one can't help thinking, well, some people have a whole lot of good karma behind them, so that when they come into contact with the Dharma they can recognize [5] it and appreciate and feel drawn towards it at once; whereas it leaves others cold. So it might even be possible to take a sort of middle path and say, well, the Buddha, yes, in a sense, was an ordinary man, but perhaps he was one of those people with some sort of special genius for the spiritual life, whether on account of previous karma or not it is very difficult for us to say, just from our own knowledge, as it were; we can only really

speculate. But it doesn't seem, if one sifts the material in a critical way, it doesn't seem that the Buddha made for himself the sort of claims that were afterwards attributed to him.

Uttara: So the Jatakas and all that have just been attached on to it?

S: Well, that's not quite so straightforward. You will have to read The Eternal Legacy. There are Jatakas and Jatakas. There are what we call canonical Jatakas and non-canonical Jatakas. The non-canonical Jatakas are in the majority; there are more than 500 of them, and these are clearly Indian folk tales that have been adapted. And what about the canonical Jatakas? Well, in these those which occur in other parts of the Canon mostly, and could possibly have been told by the Buddha himself simply represent the Buddha as having been, in his previous lives, either a righteous king or a sort of hermit, a wise man; which seems quite credible that someone with that sort of karma could be born with a special aptitude for the spiritual life. There is not really any great mention of aeons and aeons of effort as a Bodhisattva in the way that the Mahayana, say, later on believed. But it does raise all sorts of questions as to how one regards the Buddha; because if one does regard the Buddha as a sort of semi-divine figure from the beginning, it might be very inspiring but the Buddha as such can hardly be a model for us, at least not in the short term.

Uttara: You do get people talking about goals [.. .] that Stream Entry seems more accessible from where people are now, whereas Enlightenment seems sometimes quite far off; so therefore

S: Well, with Stream Entry as it were, you are safe because you can't fall below a certain point ever. So even if you do rest on your oars a bit, you can't be swept away. Not that it's a good thing just to rest on your oars, anyway.

Sumana: Do you know the origin of the teaching of the 32 marks of the great man? It seems to be in Hinduism as well, ...

S: No, it's a very strange thing. It is one of the mysteries, in a way, of Buddhism. Because in the Pali scriptures, the wise brahmins are frequently credited with the knowledge of these signs. But Hindu Sanskrit literature contains no reference to them. Vedic literature seems to contain no reference to them. So scholars are a bit puzzled as to where they came from. Maybe we have lost some of the Vedic literature, or maybe there is some other explanation. So that is why it is very difficult to ascertain exactly what some of them mean, because there is no other contemporary literature or tradition that we can refer to. We only find these lists in Buddhist literature, even though they are credited to the brahmins of the Buddha's day. It is all rather odd.

Sumana: It is odd in the extract that the brahmin, when he confirms that the Buddha has these marks, acclaims him as a Buddha and not as a Hindu deity or a reincarnation or something of that sort.

[6]
S: Yes, this is as yet an unsolved mystery.

: I was wondering, Bhante, about the thousand-spoked wheel, as opposed to the eight-spoked Dharmacakra wheel that we are more familiar with. Is this a bit like the four arms of

Avalokitesvara and the thousand arms, sort of thing, or ?

S: It is generally considered to be a solar symbol; it's the sun and its thousand rays, as it were. It does seem that quite a bit of solar myth and symbol gathered around the figure of the Buddha. He is in any case a dicchabandhu(?), isn't he, according to the Pali texts? a kinsman of the sun. Or adityabandhu(?), in Sanskrit. One early scholar tried to explain the Buddha as being entirely a solar myth, but no one follows that line of thought now. But no doubt a lot of solar symbolism did gather around the figure of the Buddha.

Uttara: I think this ties in with what we were just talking about. I remember a few years ago, when I came to see you, I mentioned I had been reading something about Hercules.

S: That's right, yes.

Uttara: And you mentioned that you had been thinking about the relationship between the Buddha and Hercules. I think you said that maybe one day you would like to think more about that and maybe write something on it. Have you done any more?

S: No, I haven't, I'm afraid. There were two things I had in mind. One was that, in the case of Hercules, you've got the Twelve Labours of Hercules, and in Buddhist tradition a slightly later tradition you've got the Twelve Great Acts of the Buddha. And what else was there? Yes: you know there were the sort of Indo-Greek kingdoms in Afghanistan, that sort of area, which were Buddhist for a while, and their kings issued coins; and sometimes on those coins there are figures of Hercules, who seems to be identified with Krishna that is the usual explanation, anyway. It does seem that there was an attempt to identify Greek gods with corresponding Indian figures. So I couldn't help wondering whether there was a connection between the Twelve Labours of Hercules and the Twelve Great Acts of the Buddha. Usually it is said that Hercules corresponds to Krishna; but that is a bit speculative. I couldn't help wondering whether the Greeks in their way regarded Hercules as the equivalent of the Buddha, because Hercules is represented, in Greek mythology, as a sort of saviour figure delivering from evils and all that sort of thing, exerting himself for the benefit of humanity, even though he has his weaker human side. So it is just possible though it obviously needs to be looked into that there is some very distant connection between the two figures. Sometimes, if you read some of the legends about Hercules, he does have a slightly Bodhisattva aspect. This is brought out very strongly by the Stoics. In Stoicism, apparently, especially later Roman Stoicism, Hercules was a very popular figure and they stressed his ethical side more and more, even the slightly spiritual side: Hercules as a deliverer from evil and as serving humanity and rescuing humanity, and all that kind of thing; and eventually, of course, they sent him to heaven. It is as though the whole concept of Hercules was refined, almost, and it was strongly almost sort of spiritualized; which is interesting. Anyway, that's a bit by the way.

Ratnaprabha: Before we go on from the 32 marks, I just wonder if you have any thoughts about any of the other marks; because when we studied them we found them, [7] I think, very bizarre, some of them; yet we thought perhaps there were symbolic meanings in some of the marks.

S: Yes, scholars believe that they are a sort of very mixed bag. Some have a sort of mythical significance; others represent Indian ideas of manly beauty. You should perhaps read the Lakkhana(?) Sutra of the Digha Nikaya, where there is an introduction by Rhys Davids, the

translator, where he discusses these issues. I don't know if you have brought Digha Nikaya this year?

Vessantara: Yes.

S: Well, it's there: Lakkhana Sutra. For instance, the long arms: Indian heroes are often described as long-armed. We speak, for instance, of the long arm of the law, don't we? When you are fighting, say, with a sword, or even when you are using a bow and arrow, a long arm gives you a definite advantage. So it's as though the long arm was understood quite literally, even exaggeratedly. The Buddha's arms were said to hang down to be so long that his hands reached well below his knees, which is not in accordance with our ideas of manly beauty. You can understand some of the Lakkhana Sutra in that sort of way. Some scholars, I believe but you must refer to Rhys Davids for this believe that the lakkhanas are in some way associated with the attributes of Agni, the god of fire. I am not quite sure how they arrive at that conclusion. There might be some association with the purusa, the sort of cosmic man of early Vedic thought. As far as I know, there is no monograph or special study on these lakkhanas. There ought to be one. I have a vague idea there is a scholarly article in a learned journal which I saw referred to some years ago; I have never tracked it down. You will have to hunt through recent scholarly works on Buddhism and see whether there has been any research done, but certainly no book has been produced on the subject as one might have expected. It is not the sort of subject that interests a lot of people. But I imagine actually it is a quite interesting subject if one gets into it. Why should the Buddha have been thought of in that way? It seems to represent a quite archaic level of thought, somehow transferred to the Buddha. It is strange also that we don't have any references to these lakkhanas in Vedic literature; but we do know that some Vedic literature or Vedic tradition, I should say has perished.

Ratnaprabha: Have you any ideas about the webs on the hands?

S: I believe I have read in a Tibetan source somewhere that the webs were to make the hands more like nets for catching living beings, i.e. saving them. But this might have been quite a fanciful Tibetan explanation!

: When did the Buddha first start being called adityabandhu? Was it because there were solar deities ... at that time?

S: No, I think that reason was that in the Buddha's day, as even now, members of the kshatriya castes traced their descent back either to the sun or to the moon. There are maharajas in India who still trace their descent back in this way, either to the one or to the other. It would seem, then, that the Sakyas traced their descent back to the sun, and were therefore called and the Buddha was called adityabandhu, the kinsmen of the sun. That would seem to be the explanation. There is a verse in the Dhammapada which describes the Buddha as shining like the sun, I think it says, by day and by night. So clearly there were spiritual associations, too: shining like [8] the sun, shining with spiritual radiance, or shining with the light of wisdom and so on.

Ratnaprabha: Bhante, we were reading the passage about the Buddha's description of the previous Buddhas, and he talks about distances of time like 91 kalpas and 31 kalpas; but I think I have heard you suggest that there may have been some memory or tradition about

previous great teachers and great human beings, which perhaps the Buddha was referring to when he considered previous Buddhas; and maybe this may be something I imagined but he sometimes discusses what the Buddhas do, what the Enlightened Ones do, as if he feels himself a part of an actual existing tradition. So

S: Yes, again, of course, this raises questions of the date of particular texts. That passage is from the Digha Nikaya, which is not one of the very earliest texts as far as we can make out. When I say 'very earliest texts', I am not referring actually, of course, to a written text but to an oral recension of material. But the Jains, for instance, had a corresponding tradition about their thirthankaras, and at least one of their thirthankaras is believed to have been a historical character that is Parsva(?). He is believed by scholars to have lived about the ninth century BC, that is to say about 300 or 400 years before Mahavira. And the Buddha, of course, does refer to 'the wise', the Buddhas in a general, nontechnical sense. He clearly doesn't regard himself as the first of the wise. But to what degree the Buddha's assignment of previous Buddhas, in the more technical sense, to previous kalpas outside history altogether [verb?], is rather doubtful. Sometimes I think that sort of tradition had its origins in a way perhaps in Sumeria, because there are Sumerian traditions we know about, I think, from clay tablets, to the effect that there were kings living many, many thousands of years previously, and also just as in Buddhist tradition that their lifetime was extraordinarily long. There may be some echo of that in the Old Testament, even, where the patriarchs, especially Methuselah, lived for hundreds and hundreds of years. That is rather interesting. So, yes, you do get this impression that the Buddha is conscious of continuing a tradition, or reviving a tradition which has become corrupt or lost: not that he is absolutely an originator. That sort of feeling, that sort of sense, does come out quite strongly in some parts of the Pali Canon. But to what extent it is to be attributed to the historical Buddha, and in what sense, that is rather more difficult to understand.

Ratnaprabha: Presumably, if the Buddha did consider himself to be part of a tradition of wise men, he would nevertheless have considered himself to be the first of which he was aware who had actually attained the degree of Insight that he had attained?

S: In this world period. If you are thinking of Buddhas in the full sense, then in this world period. Or if you are thinking just of wise men, Buddhas in a nontechnical sense, Buddhas with a small 'b', well, they may have existed within history as it were, but all tradition, in the sense of all knowledge of their teaching, had been lost before the Buddha's time. For instance, it is frequently a criticism of the brahmins on the Buddha's part that they are no longer capable of the attainments that their alleged ancestors were, that they no longer are knowers of the three Vedas, that they are no longer knowers of the Path to Rama(?), as they claim. They merely recite the words. The real tradition is lost. So, even if one admits that even the historical Buddha himself had some awareness of continuing a tradition, it still is not clear whether that tradition existed within what we regard as history or within what we might regard as purely legendary prehistory, even in other worlds. We are not even clear whether the Buddha himself [9] would have made that sort of distinction whether the state of knowledge in the Buddha's day would have permitted that sort of distinction; we don't even know that for sure. That distinction between what we call the historical and what we call the legendary prehistorical period. But it is not so long ago, not many hundreds of years ago, that in Britain not only was Arthur regarded as a historical character but King Brute was regarded as a historical character, and Lear was regarded as a historical character, or Lud was regarded as a historical character. And Brute was supposed to have been a Trojan, as far as I remember,

who left Troy after its sack and landed on the shores of Britain and founded the line of ancient British kings. All that, in Elizabethan times, was regarded as pure history. Now it is only pure legend. But in those days they didn't really distinguish in that sort of way. So it s the same in India to an even greater extent, because there were vast tracts of prehistory of this sort covering millions of years.

Ratnaprabha: If one does ascribe to the Buddha the remarks about the previous Buddhas, he is quite specific in what he says. For example, there are long gaps when there are no Buddhas, and in this present kalpa he enumerates five Buddhas. So it doesn't seem arbitrary, does it? It seems as if he must be referring to something, at least.

S: In a way it is arbitrary, and that arbitrariness is in a way interesting, if not reassuring, because if it had been just a sort of invention, so to speak, one might have expected it to be regularly plotted; but the very irregularity is in a way more convincing! Do you see what I mean? But we can't, in our present state of knowledge, really say. Perhaps we had just better suspend

Side 2

disbelief.

Ratnaprabha: Do you think it possible, Bhante, that the tradition of pratyekabuddhas mentioned by the Mahayana could refer to previous great teachers whom the Buddha himself considered to be, in a very general sense, wise men who had not succeeded in founding a Dharma or a Sangha?

S: Well, pratyekabuddhas are, according to the full late tradition, Buddhas, the only difference being that they don't teach; though it seems rather odd that, being Buddhas, they shouldn't teach. The Pratyekabuddha represents a real mystery. There is a little book that came out on the subject a couple of years ago, which we have at Padmaloka, which you might consult. But again, that is another mystery who or what the pratyekabuddhas are or were. According to most scholars, they seem to represent the pre-Buddhist rishi, the wise man. In other words, they are buddhas with a small 'b' originally, not with a capital B; but incorporated into Buddhist tradition as Buddhas with a capital B, thereby giving rise to all sorts of doctrinal problems with which we are still bothered. Anyway, a Pratyekabuddha is a contradiction in terms. How can anybody be pratyeka in that sense, Enlightened or unenlightened?

Ratnaprabha: What do you mean? How can an unenlightened person be pratyeka?

S: What I mean is that no human being can live for himself alone. You have at least some communication with other human beings as I said, whether Enlightened or unenlightened. Even if you just look at them, there is some communication. Even if you avoid them, there is communication! [10] You seem to have been investigating all the conundrums and mysteries in this chapter. What else have we got?

Padmapani: Bhante, in the Buddha's reply to King Pasenadi, on page 185, is he implying that it is possible to be omniscient and all-seeing, given the time that is, he knows all, he sees all, in one single moment? And is it possible

S: Ah.

Padmapani: it's not possible to be omniscient in one single moment?

S: This would seem to refer to a Jaina doctrine or teaching. The Jains seemed to believe, at least according to Buddhist sources, that their Enlightened teacher, Mahavira, did know everything simultaneously in a single instant of time. This the Buddha denied; he denied, apparently, that it was possible for anybody to have that kind of knowledge. But he did claim, as I think the following passage makes clear, that in his own case he did have complete knowledge of such things as the Path to Nirvana what conduced to Nirvana or did not conduce to Nirvana; but he didn't claim omniscience, either in the Jaina sense or in the sense that he knew everything, even, say, historical and geographical facts and so on. He claimed omniscience, if that is the word, only with regard to the Transcendental Path and Goal.

Padmapani: So Mahavira, then his knowledge was purely mundane omniscience?

S: Not according to the Jaina tradition, of course, yes. But the Buddha or Buddhists would have said that, whatever his knowledge, he could not have known everything simultaneously in a single moment of time.

Ratnaprabha: But the passage does seem to imply that somebody might be able to know everything, if it wasn't in a single moment of time.

S: Ah, yes, it could be taken logically, but I would say that that was not actually the Buddha's meaning, because he disclaimed for himself omniscience of any kind, except in the very limited sense that I have mentioned.

Cittapala: Would that also relate to his capacity to see into the future, particularly with regard to predicting Buddhahood or ?

S: The Pali texts, as far as I remember, don't represent the Buddha as predicting anyone to Buddhahood. That comes in Mahayana sutras. But the Buddha does look backwards, as it were, and he does say he can look back into his previous lives as far as he likes. But he never says that he sees them all at one and the same time, one and the same instant. It does seem that he passes from one to another not that he exhausts them all as though there were a sort of finite number of them, but that he can go as far back as he wishes there not being any ultimate first point, anyway.

Cittapala: And so that's interesting his capacity to look into the future, presumably, is in a sense as limited as ours?

S: I don't remember any occasion in the Pali Scriptures I may be wrong I don't remember any occasion where the Buddha does look into the future; except by way of, say, deducing, as it were, future occurrences from present circumstances; but no sort of direct vision into the future. But there seems to be no reason, in a sense, why the Buddha should not have that sort of faculty.

[11]
Cittapala: So any assertion that, because the Buddha's consciousness stands outside of space

and time therefore means that he can as it were see right the way through time to as far as he likes or backward as far as he likes, is just a logical nonsense in a sense?

S: No, I wouldn't say that, because I think there is evidence of precognition. So why should not the Buddha have precognitive faculty? The only point I am making is that, as far as I recollect, there is no reference to that in the Pali Scriptures; though certainly the Mahayana sutras make such references, mainly in the form of predictions to Enlightenment of various people. But I certainly wouldn't like to say that the Buddha didn't have access to a precognitive faculty.

Cittapala: Could you explain what is meant by a precognitive faculty?

S: Well, seeing things before they happen.

Cittapala: So how far would that extend?

S: I don't know whether one could assign a limit! Though there is, of course, the question of verification. You might see something hours before it happened, days or weeks. It seems, in a way, logical, doesn't it? Because you can see things happening at a distance and presumably you should be able to see things happening before they happen! But I feel on very firm ground here because, as I have mentioned in The Thousand-Petalled Lotus, I did once see things at a distance; but I have also had experience of seeing things before they happened, and that was at a much earlier time in my life, in my teens. It might have been associated with adolescence or that sort of thing, but I quite often saw things before they were going to happen. And it was always confirmed, it always happened just like I'd seen them, exactly. I usually saw them about half an hour before they happened; there was definitely that sort of restriction. But I can imagine other people seeing them an hour, two hours, a week, a month, years before they happened. To prove the point, it only has to be a minute, if you like; but as far as I recollect, it was almost always about half an hour. And I would just sort of see a picture, just like watching a cinema film; you just watch it unrolling. Relatively trivial incidents. And then after half an hour, that would actually happen, exactly as seen; I'd be waiting for it, sometimes, to happen. Very often it was people coming and telling me things. I knew what they were going to say; I would say it to myself as they were telling me. So that, in a way, proved the point for me, you see? I must have had quite a few such experiences; I can't remember exactly how many. It might have been a dozen, it might have been even 20 or 30; but only that period, within maybe a couple of years. I think it was about when I was 16, 17, 18, that age. But not again, not afterwards. I must have lost something!

Cittapala: That would presumably relate to a psychic power rather than any special attribute of the Buddha?

S: Oh yes, it just happened. I had not even started meditating then. I had some interest in Buddhism, in fact considered myself a Buddhist, but I certainly hadn't meditated or anything like that. In fact, it was a period of some emotional upheaval for me well, you know how at that age it sometimes is! I had my emotional upheavals like everybody else. Of course, it may have been connected with all that, who knows? It's difficult to say. But the things I used to see before they happened, as far as I remember, were always quite everyday, trivial things, nothing of [12] any striking significance at all. Not that anything of very striking significance was happening to me then, apart from what I was reading in books. So I find it difficult to

believe that the Buddha didn't have that faculty, even if he didn't actually exercise it. But it may be that the Pali Scriptures don't mention it.

Padmapani: Bhante, I remember there was an incident where an actor says to the Buddha he's making everybody laugh and happy and he says 'Do you think I will go to heaven?' and he asks three times; and the Buddha says 'You will go to hell.' Is he actually predicting that the person will go to hell, or is he saying 'If you carry on like that you will go to hell'?

S: It seems to be nearer the latter, because the Buddha does give a reason, doesn't he? He goes on to say, 'And the reason is' or words to that effect 'that, being deluded, you increase by your acting the delusion of others.' So he is as it were saying that the logical result of that is such-and-such. I believe he does actually say, 'You will go to hell,' but I don't think that can be understood literally. The Buddha is only as it were deducing his future fate from what he knows of his present behaviour there is always the possibility of change. In fact, he did change, didn't he? It was Talaputto; he became an arhant, and there is a lengthy gatha in the Theragatha, isn't there? So the Buddha could not have been predicting, that's the point. He must have been just pointing out the logical consequences of the path that he was then following. This gave him such a shock that he just became a bhikkhu straight away, practically, and gained arhantship soon afterwards. Talaputto, yes. Apart from the two translations of the Theragatha, there is a separate translation of that gatha by Bhikkhu Soma under the title of His Last Performance! He sang or chanted this rather lengthy series of gathas; it's one of the longest gathas in the Theragatha. Being an actor, perhaps that was to be expected!

Manjuvajra(?) [Sin Choon]: If I'm not mistaken, in the story of Devadatta, the Buddha did predict that in the future Devadatta would become, I'm not sure, a Buddha or something?

S: Ah, you must distinguish the Pali Canon and Sanskrit sutras here. In the Sanskrit sutras, Devadatta is predicted to Buddhahood. The only quasi-prediction I can remember from the Pali Canon is where the Buddha says: 'Devadatta will be very lucky if he can manage to be reborn as a mangy old jackal'! (Laughter.) The Buddha could use strong language too, you see! There are precedents! That was a sort of prediction; but then again, deducing from Devadatta's behaviour that's rather a different thing.

Ratnaprabha: There is another example, I think from the Pali Canon, which is at least presented as a prediction in the way it's written down, but perhaps, I think from what you've said about this particular example, maybe one can't take it as such; but that is the ordination of Mahaprajapati and the foundation of the order of nuns. It does actually say that 'Since this Order has been founded, therefore the Sangha will only last 500 years'. It seems to say so in so many words. Would you say that one has to take that as being simply a deduction from 'If the nuns don't follow the special rules, then it will '

S: Yes, I've thought about this, because one particular scholar believes that only that simile of the embankment is part of what the Buddha actually said; he gives certain reasons for that, which I forget. There is another comparison of blight falling on a field. This particular scholar thinks that those extra similes were added, but the simile of the bank was original; and that in a way seems more logical, because a bank or embankment is built to contain waters, to prevent them [13] from devastating the countryside. It is a protective measure. So, when Mahaprajapati was permitted to Go Forth, the Buddha imposed on her those eight garuka(?)

dhammas or serious rules to be observed, to prevent the deterioration of the Sangha. So then it follows logically, if one just bears in mind that particular simile, that the Sangha would have had its life shortened if the Buddha had not imposed those particularly strict rules. So the additional similes seem to make nonsense of that kind of comparison I think that is this particular scholar's argument and that they are therefore redundant and probably added later.

Ratnaprabha: There are not only the additional similes but the forthright statement that it will only last 500 years.

S: Yes. Because, if it will only last 500 years, in a way what was the purpose of those garuka dhammas? So I would regard that not as a prediction.

Vessantara: Would you say the same of the Buddha's prediction that 'The Dharma will die out from the time when women recite a single verse of the Dharma'?

S: Mm, yes, that's true; I'm not sure whether that is actually in the Pali Scriptures. It's certainly not in the earliest strata. But there is a passage to that effect somewhere. But then again, that could even be regarded as logical deduction; also as having a sort of hortatory value, that the bhikkhus should value the Dharma which they now have in its completeness; the time may well come when it will not be so easily available.

Vessantara: Talking about precognition, Bhante, do you see any reason why emotional upheaval should precipitate the experience of unusual powers or faculties?

S: I really don't know. Adolescence is a period of general growth, emotional disturbance and so on, but why there should be that sort of specific connection I can't see. It may well be the case, though. But anyway, other people have many odd experiences around the time of adolescence.

Voices: Mm... And a bit after.

S: Ah. Well, yes, one does have, later on in life, but they seem to cluster, perhaps, around adolescence, possibly. I won't be too sure of that. Poltergeist phenomena seem usually to occur in the vicinity of emotionally disturbed adolescent girls, don't they? Anyway, any more questions?

Shantipada [Gerd]: I was wondering if one could draw any other conclusion from this statement of the Buddha that no one is able to know all in a single moment. I [took it] that the human mind is only able to concentrate on one thing in one single moment, and that the different capacities of different minds just consist in their pace, as it were, to go from one thing to another.

: Of course, ... what do you mean by one thing? One could say that one thing is a compound of a number of things, and that in a sense there is never 'one thing'. You take in wholes, as it were, which are complex. The question is, how big is that complex that you take in? The Jains seem to have believed that for their enlightened teacher the whole universe just constituted one thing, which he took in, as it were, which he knew, in a single moment of time.

[14]
Shantipada: Could one say that it is only possible to focus in one direction at a time, rather than in two or more?

S: Well, what does one mean by direction? That is a metaphorical expression here, isn't it? I think perhaps one can say that usually one's mind functions most efficiently when you are not as it were passing from one thing to another, but when you grasp things as wholes. You find this, for instance, when you are writing, don't you? It is as though you grasp whatever you want to write about, the idea as a whole, and then you unwind that, little by little, as you write about it. Well, you grasp, in a sense, the whole of it together before you start writing; especially if it is something relatively short. It is said that Mozart said that he heard a symphony, all of it, simultaneously before he started writing it down. He experienced it in sort of spatial terms. He experienced its gestalt, perhaps!

Uttara: Yes, when he was asked he just said, 'It's in here.' he just stated he more or less thought about it it just came out through listening.

Shantipada: I was thinking in a way, by practising mindfulness, trying to focus on one thing, that ... at a time; we are training this capacity, aren't we?

S: Yes and no. There seem to be two kinds of concentration, one where you sort of pinpoint something and all your energies are bent on that; but there is another kind of concentration where you do take in a quite complex whole, which may be quite big in the sense of quite extensive.

Uttara: You mentioned in the lecture on Fidelity that one wasn't just aware of the moment and there would be an awareness of the future... and of the past. So it wasn't like you were just 'being here now', so to speak.

S: So you could imagine Mozart just concentrating on a single note. That would correspond to concentration in one sense. But then, also, apparently, he could as it were concentrate on the whole symphony at once. So that would be concentration of another kind.

Shantipada: But your latter statement seems to be almost contradictory to what is stated here that it is possible to know all in one single moment.

S: Ah, but the 'all' that is referred to here seems to be the totality of existence itself, not just one particular whole within that. But perhaps it is a question of the sort of area of consciousness. You can narrow that. But I think, if the whole of which you are aware has a sort of significance, then you can grasp a number of particular things within that as one whole, as Mozart did in the case of the symphony. He didn't just go as it were from one part to another. He was all there at the same time in his experience. Perhaps when we are really concentrated we can grasp things as complex wholes in this way; and maybe it is more than concentration maybe there is an element of sort of inspiration. It would seem that to grasp things as wholes in that way there needs to be a very intense emotional experience, which you don't usually get if you are concentrating on things in a pinpointing sense. Do you see what I am getting at? But when the Jains spoke in terms of 'all knowledge', especially knowledge in one moment of time, they seem to have meant that quite literally, at least according to Buddhist tradition that the enlightened Jain teacher could tell you the exact number of leaves

on any particular tree. That sort of omniscience the Buddha seems to have repudiated. You can certainly apprehend the tree as a whole quite vividly, without necessarily knowing exactly how many leaves are on it. Maybe Mozart could [15] have 'heard' the symphony, as it were, in one instant, but he probably could not have told you how many notes were involved! Well, he might have been able to, as far as I know, but probably not, I would say.

: Do you think that's the difference between the Buddha's experience of omniscience and Mahavira's that the Buddha could sort of see it all, whereas Mahavira could only like just see a point, and

S: Yes, it does seem that again, we are relying on Buddhist sources but it does seem that Mahavira's conception of omniscience was simultaneous knowledge of all particular facts; not, say, a knowledge of the significance of all things, but a knowledge of them in their particularity. Not a gestalt-like knowledge, as it were, but a sort of ticking of them off one by one ... in one moment of time.

: Could you use 'intuition' rather than gestalt ... ?

S: Oh, I think that would just make the whole issue less clear. It is such an ambiguous term, intuition. I suppose you could, but it depends what sort of meaning you assigned to it. But it as though, if you just know things in their particularities, are sort of dry mental knowledge in the narrower sense, but if there is a strong emotional element it sort of holds together all those particulars so that you can apprehend them all together, I don't know if that is very clear?

Uttara: Almost visionary.

S: Yes, almost visionary; yes, yes. You see, as it were, simultaneously instead of enumerating successively; just as Mozart did. He sort of 'saw' simultaneously first, or heard simultaneously, then he had to enumerate the notes one by one as he wrote them down.

: I was wondering, Bhante, can you relate this seeing things as a whole to Insight, in that you gain the Insight and then as it were the ramifications of that come later?

S: No, I wasn't there is such a thing, yes, but I don't think it is quite the same as what I was talking about.

: Could you say what the difference is, please?

S: Insight is more like understanding a general principle and then applying it to particular instances, so you move from the general principle to the particular instances. But seeing things in the visionary gestalt-oriented way is as it were more poetic, more imaginative. You are not, say, applying a general principle to a particular instance. In fact, you don't really distinguish between general principles and particular instances. They are all sort of held together. I would say the gestalt type of experience is definitely more yes, as I said, poetic and imaginative; whereas the Insight type of experience doesn't seem like that. Maybe that is a narrow way of looking at Insight, but that is the way it is usually presented.

Cittapala: Bhante, this is it may be very simple, but on p. 194 in the text perhaps I can just read it out. The Buddha has a visit from a particular brahmin who has apparently asked him a

number of questions, and the Buddha replies: I have had the experience of teaching the Law to an assembly of many hundreds. Perhaps someone has fancied: 'The monk Gotama is preaching

the Law on my personal account'. But it [16] should not be regarded so. A Perfect One preaches the Law to others in order to give them knowledge. When the talk is over, then I steady my mind in myself, quiet it, bring it to singleness and concentrate it on that same object of consciousness on which I was concentrating before. In our study group, we were just wondering whether there seemed to be two ways one could interpret this statement 'Perhaps someone fancied the monk Gotama is preaching the law on my personal account.'

S: Sometimes that did happen. There are definitely passages where the Buddha is described as having an audience of several hundred people and seen that there is just one person who is going to understand what he has to say and teaches just for the sake of that person. For instance, Suppabuddha the leper; he is such an instance. So there are such instances in the Pali Canon.

Cittapala: I see. That would seem to be the obvious way to interpret it grammatically, but it didn't seem to make very much sense of the ensuing two or three lines. So we were wondering whether in fact, instead of the pronoun 'my', it should have been 'his', implying that this person was saying that the monk Gotama was preaching for some form of personal aggrandisement.

S: It could be. One would have to look at the Pali text to see whether it did bear that interpretation. Just read that bit again.

Cittapala: 'Perhaps someone has fancied: The monk Gotama is preaching the Law on my personal account. But it should not be regarded so.'

S: Yes; the crux would be whether 'my' is there in the Pali, or 'one's', and it has been translated as 'my'. One would just have to look at that. Pity we don't have these Pali texts with us, isn't it? But supposing it is 'my' but maybe we shouldn't think about that just yet.

Cittapala: Well, it seems to make sense either way. It was just

S: Except that if it is 'my', then it isn't in agreement with some of those other instances in the Pali Canon which I mentioned. Anyway, make a note to look it up. One should always follow these things up.

Sanghapala: At the bottom of page 186, in the last paragraph, it speaks of seclusion: 'The thought of harmlessness and the thought of seclusion.' This is the thought that the Enlightened One thinks about. Does it mean seclusion in the sense of no other people about, or seclusion in company with others of a similar inclination?

S: Read the whole passage.

Sanghapala: It says: This was said by the Blessed One, said by the Accomplished One, so I heard: 'Two thoughts often occur to a Perfect One, accomplished and fully Enlightened: the thought of harmlessness and the thought of seclusion. A Perfect One takes pleasure and

delights in non-affliction, and with that it often occurs to him: 'By such behaviour I afflict none, timid or bold.' A perfect One takes pleasure and delight in seclusion, and with that it often occurs to him: 'What is unprofitable has been abandoned.'

[17]
S: So 'unprofitable' that would seem to suggest mental states. I don't know what the word for 'seclusion' is: it could be viveka.

Sanghapala: It is, yes.

S: It is? Which does mean separation from external conditions, but I think not often separation from mental states. So I think here seclusion would be seclusion or separation from unskilful, that is unprofitable, mental states. Though that doesn't exclude, of course, external seclusion. Very often the one helps the other.

Sanghapala: There are the three types of viveka, three types of control. One is just the bodily, the next one is the mental, and then there is, I think, Enlightenment, the next one, where there is total withdrawal. This doesn't refer to one's ... with others in any sense at all, is that correct?

S: Well, it doesn't exclude that, because, as I have said, you may have to have the external seclusion to be able to experience the internal. But internal seclusion seems to be the primary sense here.

: Does that mean the dhyana states?

S: I think they are actually described sometimes in terms of viveka, seclusion.

Sanghapala: I was actually going to give a talk on this.

S: Ah, you are well primed. I think sometimes viveka is translated as 'aloof', isn't it? That probably doesn't quite bear its meaning. Eka is 'one', isn't it? I don't know how the word is made up: viveka usually indicates a sort of intensification, so ... just being on your own. You could, perhaps, render it as a sort of more intense experience of one's own being, which does more often happen when you are physically separated from other people.

: Can viv not also be a sort of separative prefix?

S: Yes. But what is the eka, then, that one would be separated from?

: Is there a word connected to, sort of, veka?

S: Not that I remember. I am only guessing at the etymology; it may be even quite different. But it probably has something to do with eka. You couldn't say vieka; you would have to have a consonant in between for euphony, anyway. Again, we need our dictionary. Anything more?

Sanghapala: There is another question, Bhante. It doesn't directly arise out of the text, it occurred to me when we were reading the text. Is it the case that pre-Buddhist Hinduism had no inkling of the imminent arrival of the Buddha, no notion that the Buddha was coming?

S: Well, the question is based on certain assumptions. When you say 'the Buddha', that particular term 'the Buddha' with a capital B, as it were, is a product of slightly later Buddhist thought, anyway. Originally 'buddha' meant one who was wise; that is the meaning the word has predominantly in the Buddhavaggo of the Dhammapada. [18] So in the pre-Buddhist times, the Vedic Hindus did have the conception of the wise man, the Buddha; they didn't seem to have had the conception of the Buddha, with a capital B, in the full Buddhist later technical sense. So they don't seem to have been looking out for anyone of that kind. None the less, there is that episode of Anathapindika, where his friend says: 'The Buddha is coming,' and he says: 'Oh, did you say the Buddha?' as though it was a well-known sort of concept. So it is difficult to explain that. But there is nothing parallel to, say, in the case of Christianity, the Jews' expectation of a Messiah there is nothing like that. Buddhists, of course, expect Maitreya, but there is nothing to suggest that Hindus were on the lookout for Gotama the Buddha. If anything, that would have been a rather disturbing thought for the brahmins!

Sanghapala: That is the kind of thing I was thinking, Bhante: it's as though you feel or I feel, anyway! if they had had some idea that this man was about to arrive, it would really shock and change their whole way of operating; it would have such a profound effect upon their ethnical attitude.

S: There is no hint, as far as I can recollect, that the brahmins were living in apprehension of the advent of any such person. Maybe it was just as well for their peace of mind that that was not the case. From their point of view, or at least from the point of view of some of them, it was quite bad enough having the Buddha when he actually was around!

Ben: There is a section here where the Buddha rebukes his cousin Nanda, for wearing robes of the same size, the same measurements. And it says that he made a training rule that any bhikkhu who should wear a robe of the measurement of the Sublime One's robe commits an offence involving expiation. I was puzzled by this whole section, I don't understand.

Side 3

S: So what is the puzzle?

Ben: First of all, it seems quite a trivial matter. Nanda is wearing robes

S: Ah, but is this the First Voice or the Second Voice?

Ben: It's the Second Voice.

S: Ah, then that's from the Vinaya Pitaka, then, isn't it? The Vinaya Pitaka deals with trivial things! (Laughter.) That is its job! It deals with matters of ordinary everyday living, where some rules need to be laid down, one might say.

Ben: I suppose I couldn't see what rule needed to be laid down here. There didn't seem to be anything in particular that Nanda had done; he didn't seem to have done anything

S: Well, I suppose it was inconvenient for the other monks, as the text makes clear, I think that they should mistake Nanda for the Buddha. [It would be] a bit embarrassing if they

thought the Buddha was coming, because they saw this robe of a particular size, apparently; then when he got nearer they realized it wasn't; so they were sort of disappointed. That seems to be the suggestion. Also, perhaps there is a suggestion of a slight impropriety in someone wearing the same kind of robe, or same size of robe, as the Buddha, as though they were aping the Buddha in some way.

[19]
But there are other passages in the Pali Canon which suggest that the Buddha didn't look any different from anybody else. So it is not easy to reconcile these different accounts. It could well be that that idea of no one wearing a robe the same size as the Buddha, or even that the Buddha had a specially big robe, was a later development. It is very difficult to tell.

Sumana: I suppose it is the modern equivalent of us wearing a golden kesa!

S: (chuckles) I suppose so. If you saw a golden kesa coming in the distance, well - !

Sumana: We'd think it was you!

: I don't want to labour what is obviously a very trivial point, but I can't see any sense in that at all, in that the length of robe, surely, is not a matter of

S: No, the point doesn't seem to have been that, but the fact that the robe was the same size as the Buddha's. It is not that it was, say, an absolute length in itself, that it was, say, 5ft. when 4ft. was appropriate, but it suggests it has some kind of resemblance to or parity with the Buddha. That seems to be the point of the passage.

: But again, the point would only have strength if it was a critical similarity. And for somebody to be the same size as the Buddha

S: The Vinaya Pitaka does deal with all sorts of quite trivial matters that you shouldn't make a noise when eating, and so on and so forth. Maybe it is more interesting that the translator should have included it! Maybe that is more significant.

Sanghapala: Bhante, it is talking about actual measurements. It does say: The measurements of the Sublime One's robes are nine spans long and six spans across, of the Sublime One's span.

S: Yes; not that that has an absolute value in itself, but only as it is worn by the Buddha; so that it becomes a sort of badge of the Buddha, a means of recognizing the Buddha, a means of identification for the Buddha. That seems to be the point. So that, therefore, it is not appropriate that some other person should wear a robe of those dimensions. The whole point seems to be to avoid confusing other monks with the Buddha. If the Buddha had worn a very short robe, presumably it wouldn't have been appropriate for other monks to wear a very short robe. The actual size here seems to be irrelevant.

Sunanda: Bhante, nine by six spans would seem to be enough cloth to house several bhikkhus. (Laughter.)

S: What is a span?

Sunanda: Well, it says 'of the Sublime One's span', so I assume that means something between about five and six feet of cloth.

S: A span?

Sunanda: Assuming a span hand to hand.

[20]
S: No, a span is usually across the width of the hand. I don't know what the original Pali word is here, but a span in the old Anglo-Saxon measurement is this amount; this is a yard, and the foot, of course, is a foot. But it can't mean it is just a rough equivalent; it can't be a span in this sense. There is some evidence to suggest that bhikkhus and monks generally in the Buddha's day, wanderers, wore robes of comparatively small dimensions compared with what they wear nowadays: reaching just below the knee and [this] sort of shawl around the shoulders, not the larger, more elaborate robes that are worn today.

Jayamati: It does seem from the text that all the translator is trying to establish is that the Buddha was of normal height. It seems rather an elaborate way of establishing it. But I think that's probably

S: Well, one mustn't forget the situation in Sri Lanka. I have met Sri Lankan Buddhists admittedly, lay people who believed that the Buddha was 18ft. in height! It doesn't make any difference to the teaching, whether the Buddha was 18ft. in height or six; that doesn't affect the truth of the teaching one way or the other, but perhaps the translator has those little traditions or legends in mind. Because, don't forget, there is this footprint of the Buddha at Sripada, and that is of enormous dimensions. And apparently simple-minded Sri Lankan Buddhists regard that as actually planted there by the Buddha, and the Buddha being of corresponding dimensions. It is easy to laugh, but I have met people down in the West Country, I'm afraid, years ago, who actually believed that Adam and Eve were historical characters. It doesn't really matter, I suppose, from a spiritual point of view, one way or the other. I have read a very scientific book maybe Ratnaprabha should make a note of this! An American biologist has tried to demonstrate that there must have been an original pair of human beings, and they must have been Adam and Eve. He was an orthodox Catholic. And he marshals an enormous amount of evidence to prove this, and a very complex line of argument! So there could be some treatise written, perhaps, to prove that the Buddha must have been 18ft. in height, and not of normal height at all. But again, does it really matter? If you read the Vinaya Pitaka there are five or six thick volumes of it you will find lots of very interesting trivia! You will find a complete list of all the different sorts of noises you mustn't make when eating!

Sanghapala: If he actually was 18ft. in height, that would explain the whole thing, because if Nanda was wearing the robe of a guy who was 18ft. in height (laughter).

S: It wouldn't really explain anything at all, because if the Buddha was 18ft. in height it wouldn't matter what robe he was wearing, he would be immediately distinguishable. (Laughter.) No one could possibly be mistaken for him.

Vessantara: [Perhaps Nanda] was also 18ft. in height!

S: If they were both 18ft. high, there would not be much point in them wearing particular sizes of robes. Anyway, the point seems to be far from trivial! It seems to have aroused the greatest interest of any question [today]. Maybe it's symbolical.

Chakkhupala: Unfortunately, Bhante, the episode doesn't actually demonstrate that the Buddha was of normal height, only that Nanda was four finger-breadths shorter than he.

[21]
S: Perhaps it was well known that Nanda was a little on the short side! Well, Nanda wasn't the Buddha; so if the Buddha differed from him only by four inches, or whatever it was, Nanda being an ordinary human being, the Buddha couldn't have been all that much different from the human norm. Perhaps it means simply that: trying to establish a sort of point of reference. Anyway, one thing I don't know how far you got through this chapter, but I was just wondering whether people had got much of an idea about the Buddha as a person. One didn't gather that from the questions, but maybe you did get a strong impression of the Buddha as a person none the less, except that you didn't have any particular questions to ask about that.

Vessantara: I don't think we did, not from this chapter.

S: Because in a sense the Buddha doesn't seem to enter into it at all. I don't know whether it's the fault of the particular selections in this chapter, or of the approach to the [.. .].

Chakkhupala: I was thinking about this, because it's all part of the material we studied, just showing really that the Buddha was of average height and he still had a kip in the afternoons occasionally!

S: Not occasionally; it was in the last few months of the hot weather.

Chakkhupala: But I sometimes personally, in reading about the Buddha a lot of his descriptions are in very large terms, in superlatives. There doesn't seem to be very much material which encourages a view of the person of the Buddha in ways by which one can relate to him more humanly. I was thinking of things just positive emotions, you might say a sense of humour or a delight in the natural environment or in poetry and music. I know there are a few

S: There are a few.

Chakkhupala: but it doesn't really come across, it seems, very much.

S: I think probably the early transmitters of the traditional teaching just weren't interested in those sort of details. One could say that it's even a relatively modern characteristic especially, say, the interest in nature, or even appreciation of nature. This does seem to have developed in the West comparatively late. For instance, the landscape painting emerges quite late, say landscape for its own sake, so to speak, not just as a nice background for human figures. I think there is enough material in the Pali Canon, at least, to provide some kind of more human picture of the Buddha, but it is a question of collating quite a number of isolated instances. As for a sense of humour, the Buddha certainly didn't have a broad sense of humour, but there are many instances of irony. Even though one can't always be sure what

teachings are directly attributable to the Buddha [...], none the less, it does seem that recourse to a sort of gentle irony was definitely characteristic of the Buddha; it is so persistent in the Pali Canon, and it is often so subtle that it does seem to have its origins in an actual historical personality. Sometimes the irony is muffled because, though it's there you can detect it whatever the Buddha has said has been translated into the very repetitive idiom of the oral transmission. I can't think of an example offhand, but I came across one or two in this volume itself. There's not only the little incident about the Buddha's afternoon nap during the last month of the hot weather; there are one or two [22] references to the Buddha's back aching when he was an old man. For instance, when he asks I think it was Sariputra and Moggallana to go on discoursing for him while he lay down and rested because his back was aching. You get some human touches. Then there's the appreciation of, apparently, the beauty of certain caityas and groves on the Buddha's last journey, when he had his last look at them. I have mentioned one or two instances in Buddhism and Art, haven't I? The Buddha appreciates the colourful spectacle of the young Licchavis driving along in their chariots, some in white robes, some in red, some in yellow, and he says they just look like an assembly of the gods. So it shows he was sensitive to things of that sort. But there aren't many such references; as though those who transmitted the tradition didn't value them, or didn't think them worth remembering. One does perhaps get that impression. But there are a few of them that do survive. And then there's the incident which I've mentioned of Ananda, just before the Buddha's Parinirvana, saying 'He who was so kind' there you get some insight into the Buddha's character or the way in which he treated Ananda. And then, of course, the Buddha and the sick monk, the case of dysentery; again, some little sidelight on the Buddha's character and behaviour. Some authors of general books on Buddhism do bring quite a few of these sort of things together, but perhaps it needs to be done on an even more systematic scale and in a more sympathetic manner, perhaps, with a bit more spiritual understanding. Because there seems no doubt that the Buddha was a historical personality, not just a solar myth. But we know very little about the personal habits or characteristics of characters in very early history. We know a bit about Confucius: I think there is one whole chapter of the Confucian Analects which describes some of Confucius's personal habits and characteristics. He always set his mat straight, as it were; he always cut his meat up into neat squares, and so on. Things of that sort.

Uttara: I think there's a sutra, I think it's in The Buddhist Bible, where the Buddha is expounding a very profound teaching to Ananda, and Ananda is getting more and more wound up by the Buddha's

S: Ah, the Surangama Sutra.

Uttara: I think that's it. And I think it even says that the Buddha ends up patting Ananda on the head, because he is getting so disturbed by it. And there, even though the Buddha is giving a very profound teaching, there is still the human element there.

S: I am sorry to say this is a Chinese composition! But just that little touch might well have been taken from earlier accounts and incorporated there; but that text itself is a Chinese composition, not actually a sutra translated from the Sanskrit. It is just cast in that particular form, though it is a very interesting and even quite important work, none the less.

Uttara: It seemed there was a bit of humour going on with the Buddha and Ananda at the same time as this important teaching.

S: Well, that is quite in accordance with the Pali Canon itself that a little humour, at least in the sense of irony not hearty laughter, of course! The Buddha did say, in one passage, that laughter that shows the teeth is madness. That is rather strong, isn't it? Well, the Bible, the Old Testament, says: 'As the crackling of [23] thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of a fool' [Eccles. 7, 6], which is even stronger. I think one can, if one reads through the Pali Canon as a whole, get a sense of the Buddha as a living person. But perhaps you didn't get it quite from this chapter, so far, at least.

: I was struck thinking ... of the life of Milarepa, or Milarepa and Marpa ... You get a very full and rich picture of human beings who are striving spiritually. It is quite a difference.

S: I think one must remember, in the case of the Life of Milarepa, that it is not exactly a biography, it is a sort of almost romantic reconstruction from 200 years later the mad yogi. But it is very alive, there is no doubt about that. Perhaps, for a more total poetic impression of the Buddha, one should turn to Asvaghosa's Buddhacarita. Asvaghosa seems to avoid the more legendary; he deliberately, it seems, curtails that aspect of things. He does seem to try to make the Buddha more credible as a human personality or to present him more in those sort of terms. He seems to be addressing a sort of cultured Hindu audience that didn't particularly believe in the Buddha or Buddhism. There are many references to Hindu mythology to illustrate the life of the Buddha. The legendary and mythical element is definitely curtailed, but the poetry is very beautiful. There is also a quite solid intellectual and spiritual content. It might be interesting if somebody were to read the translation of the Buddhacarita. I do have now the complete Buddhacarita in translation. It hasn't been available before in one volume; only very recently. The first half, of course, is translated from the Sanskrit, and the second half, which is lost in Sanskrit, is translated from the Chinese translation; so one has the whole thing there in, I think, it is the 24 books, translated by Johnston. I got it only recently. In the Sacred Books of the East, you've got only the first half. Asvaghosa tells the story very skilfully, it is very well put together. He seems to be following Sarvastivada rather than Theravada sources. His account is a little different, or the sequence of events in some respects is a little different, but very plausible none the less. It is difficult to say how reliable his tradition is, or the tradition on which he bases himself, as compared with the one we find in the Pali texts, but it is a very intelligible account. I did once have the idea of writing a Life of the Buddha, drawing on all the different sources that are known. There are some traditions in Tibetan translation which add something to the Pali account. But I think that is something I'll have to leave to somebody else to do some time. It would be good to have a really inspiring Life of the Buddha, perhaps incorporating some of the more legendary elements but with definite emphasis on the Buddha as a living human personality, and using the legendary elements only in an illustrative way. Anyway, I think we must call it a day.

[24]
12 November 1986

Vessantara: We have got seven questions. We'll start with Dhammamati.

Dhammamati: On p. 200, the four defeats are mentioned, and that they result in permanent expulsion from the Order. I do see that to keep the integrity of the Order expulsion may be necessary, but permanent expulsion denies the possibility of repentance and shame, which seems to be against the spirit of Buddhism. Could you comment on that?

S: This is, of course, the Theravada tradition. The Mahayana tradition is different. The Mahayana tradition is represented by, for instance, certain passages in Dhyana for Beginners, where the Grand Master speaks of confession and repentance; and, according to the Mahayana, any offence, even the most serious, can be repented of, and one can be restored to one's original position in the spiritual community. That would seem to be more in accordance with the spirit of the Mahayana and, one might say, the spirit of Buddhism. I must confess I can't quite see the rationale of the Theravada tradition. However serious a view you take of breaking Precepts, that would not seem to justify permanently excluding somebody, because that would seem to suggest the impossibility of repentance.

Dhammamati: It's just that this does seem to go back to the Buddha's time, and I wonder why he would impose such a strict discipline, or whether it is something that has evolved later.

S: That sort of question does arise in connection with all sorts of teachings and provisions in the Buddhist scriptures generally, perhaps particularly in the case of the Pali Canon. It is not always easy to tell what must have been taught or laid down by the Buddha, and what might have been a later development. It is very difficult to tell. I am not too happy about at once regarding something as a later development if one doesn't happen to feel very happy with it; but in this particular case it does seem rather strange that somebody should be permanently excluded from the spiritual community in that way. In the case of the Order, we have always definitely taken the Mahayana sort of attitude that, provided one does not explicitly renounce one's commitment to the Three Jewels, it is possible to confess and repent of any breach of the Precepts which, of course, one should do if one becomes conscious of having broken them to any serious degree.

Dhammamati: Do you think there is the possibility of an expulsion taking place within the Western Buddhist Order?

S: I think one can't rule that out completely, though it would be a rather sad day when it came. Those who do leave the Order, the few who have left, have either resigned (sometimes still feeling quite positively towards the Movement, in a way); others seem to have just slipped away or just got out of contact and just faded away like the proverbial old soldier. But we haven't, as yet, had and I hope we don't ever have the case of someone who professes to remain right in the midst of the Movement, in the midst of the Order, and who definitely is going against the spirit of it or who is committing serious breaches of the Precepts and not confessing and repenting, and therefore having in a sense to be removed if they will not listen to any admonishment. We haven't had that experience. Some people might have broken Precepts from time to time, but I think so far in all cases they have had the grace to be ashamed, and have confessed and repented in one way or another.

[25]
Dhammamati: Are there any cases in the Theravadin tradition of repentance and yes, confession, but I wonder about repentance? Are there any actual cases of that?

S: When you say 'actual cases', what are you thinking of?

Dhammamati: Well, somebody has transgressed a Precept; they might confess it but, say, they could be expelled but because they have repented they are not expelled, or something like that.

S: It is not quite so simple as that. And, of course, in the case of the Theravada, it is laid down in that sort of detail only with regard to bhikkhus. There are different categories of Precepts for bhikkhus, and the breaking of some Precepts is more serious than the breaking of others. The breaking of some Precepts, like the ones you have mentioned, demand immediate expulsion; others require suspension; others incur various other penalties like forfeiture that was mentioned the other day and expiation, or simple confession. It would seem that, originally, in the case of the Theravada bhikkhu sangha at least, there was a fortnightly meeting for the purpose of reciting the patimokkha or pratimoksha the 150 rules, so to speak and any bhikkhu who had broken any rule was expected to confess that and then it would be dealt with. But it seems that, at a later stage, practice changed, and it would seem that before the meeting, before the patimokkha was recited, bhikkhus would get together in twos and confess to each other, so that in the course of the meeting of the whole chapter, so to speak, no confession would be required. But then, of course, that confession just of two people, the elder confessing to the junior, then the junior to the elder, became a sort of formality. I myself have experienced this. I was quite shocked the first time that I encountered this procedure, because it was gone through at such speed and without any attention to what it really meant at all. And that has more or less become the norm. To the best of my knowledge, usually, in Theravada countries, bhikkhus do not actually confess at any time; the various procedures are gone through, and it is assumed that everybody is observing the Vinaya, which is very often far from being the case. So in a sense the whole practice has broken down. It is very rarely that anybody really confesses, unfortunately; and, with the disappearance of confession real confession, the heartfelt confession a very important element has disappeared from the Buddhist life. Some of you may remember that when we went through that book, The Forest Monks of Sri Lanka, there were one or two quite moving biographies of bhikkhus, I think mostly in the last century, who had become aware that they had committed serious offences that needed to be dealt with, which they needed to confess and of which they needed to be purified; and they found it very difficult to get together monks who would agree to follow this procedure with them. Some of you may remember that. So there are, or there have been, a few bhikkhus whose conscience, so to speak, has been more alive and who have felt the need of confession; but that doesn't seem to have been, or doesn't seem to be, the general spirit or general attitude of the Theravada sangha today. Bhikkhus often leave the sangha, especially in Burma and Thailand, where it is very easy to do that; one can do it without disgrace. Sometimes if they misbehave, they are just asked to leave and they do leave. But that is partly because there the sangha is sort of supervised by the government in the form of the education department, and abbots can force their monks to disrobe and even call in the assistance of the police for that purpose. But sometimes, of course, in Thailand, bhikkhus are asked to leave the Order for reasons that have nothing to do with any breach of the Precepts; sometimes even for sort of political reasons. One bhikkhu whom I afterwards met, a very well-known one, was ousted from the Order, or at least attempts were made to oust him from the Order even to the extent of taking away his robe, because some Marxist literature [26] had been found in his cell, and the government were strongly anti-communist. He was not sympathetic to communism, but he felt that he ought at least to study Marxism and know what it was all about, because it was so prominent in the Buddhist world; so he was forcibly disrobed by the police, and he was imprisoned, just for keeping this communist literature in his cell. But after ten or twelve years, he was released and rehabilitated and was back in the robes, and I met him in Calcutta when he was on pilgrimage. He was a quite well-known case. But anyway, that is all bye the bye. I am just as it were lamenting the disappearance of real life confession from the spiritual life of many Theravada Buddhists. Many bhikkhus just don't seem to feel any need for confession at all. Many of them don't observe the Precepts very seriously, in

some cases; but they seem to have a sort of strange complacency. It is really quite odd. Maybe it isn't, maybe it's just human. But many seem to feel that if you just keep up appearances sufficiently, that's all right. They have usually behaved reasonably decently in public, but (laughter) I mean, that isn't the spiritual life, is it? just fact.

Dhammamati: So they just recite a formula in those countries?

S: Well I must also say that, in Sri Lanka, certainly, many bhikkhus don't take part in any patimokkha observance at all. It is by no means widespread which is very unfortunate. Usually, before ordinations, they get together for this confession in pairs, but it's only a formality; because, when you take part as a bhikkhu in an ordination ceremony, you are supposed to be technically pure, as it were: that is to say, not being in breach of any Precepts. But they go through it just as a formality. As I said, I was really astonished at the way they sort of rattled through it, with no real feeling whatever. I remember the bhikkhu with whom I went through this procedure this was maybe less than two years after my ordination. So this is one of the reasons why, in the Order, I have stressed, as you know, especially in one of the lectures [on] the Sutra of Golden Light, how important confession was. It's a great relief: in not confessing, you are depriving yourself of a great benefit. Everyone has got something to confess, sooner or later. There is not a single person who hasn't something, sometimes quite a lot, to confess, and it is a great relief to be able to give expression to that to people who are not just sympathetic, but they are more than sympathetic; they are sort of critically sympathetic. Not that they are unsympathetic, but they are not really going to let you get away with anything. They are not going to let you delude yourself that your behaviour has been skilful when in fact it has been unskilful; but they will point it out as friends, wanting to help one. So confession is one of the great practices of the spiritual life well, even necessities. I would even go so far as to say 'No confession, no spiritual life.'

Uttara: Our practice within the FWBO usually consists of confession more often than not, say, on retreats, where at the end of the retreat we have a sort of burning of confessions, yes?

S: Right, yes.

Uttara: Sometimes I have felt that in one way it is quite good that you are then not under the obligation to confess and you aren't pressurized into doing it; so writing something down on a piece of paper, it is quite good that you are just burning it and hopefully you are actually confessing. But sometimes I do feel that it is a bit of a hype, I don't actually feel I am really confessing in a way, I feel it might have been better if I actually had said it to somebody else, confessed what I had actually done; because it seems as if still there are those areas of oneself [27] which remain private to oneself, where those things which you have done, which maybe only if we do see the Bodhisattvas we actually or symbolically acknowledge them. Sometimes I just wonder just how much of a It depends on each person, I suppose.

S: Yes, I have spoken about this, and I have said that, if one feels the need, one can either actually confess in a chapter meeting or, if that doesn't seem appropriate, one can just gather two or three, four or five, fellow Order Members together and just tell them. Very occasionally, I think, people have actually made a confession in the context of a Puja, in the same way that they perhaps have made a vow. But we don't have any sort of established procedure; even the burning of confessions isn't really established in that sort of way. But to some extent that's deliberate, because one doesn't want it to become mechanical. I think it is

up to the individual Order Member, or even Mitra, to confess, when he or she feels like so doing, to the people that he or she feels that they really can confess to, and have the confession taken quite seriously. But it's up to individual Order Members to make the necessary arrangements where they feel the need for that, because the important thing is that you should feel purged of the unskilful behaviour, or the unskilful thought, or the unskilful speech. If, having written out and burned your confession, you don't feel purged, you don't feel free, then clearly you must take, so to speak, more drastic steps in the ways that I have suggested. But it is important that one's conscience should be clear and free. That is very important. One can't really afford to do without confession; it is not a luxury, it's a necessity.

Ratnaprabha: You talked in terms of perhaps gathering together two, three, four or five Order Members. I think, in my experience, when I have confessed something, it has usually just been to one other, in a rather informal way. Do you think it would be better if it was to several others in a more formal context? Would that have a better effect?

S: It depends entirely how you feel. I think you can confess adequately to one person, but I think you've got to be a bit careful you don't just choose a close friend who might possibly be a bit over-sympathetic, shall we say? I don't exclude that as a possibility; on occasion it may well be very effective. But I think one has to consider the matter seriously, and possibly, where the Precepts or whatever it is, are of a somewhat more serious nature, it might be better to ask, say, three or four or five Order Members to hear your confession. Also, when you confess, people presumably offer suggestions or advice, sometimes, and it might be that you get better suggestions or more helpful advice from several people than simply from one.

Douglas: I was reading in Nanamoli because we were reading forward a bit the account of, I think it's the second conference of the Sangha, when all the arhants point out Ananda's faults to him, serious breaches that he has committed

S: That was the First Council, wasn't it?

Douglas: Yes. And he says something to the effect that 'I don't actually see that as an offence, but because of my faith in the brethren I will accept it.' Do you think it is important, in order to confess, that you do see that you have actually done something wrong? What would be the force of Ananda's confession?

S: Yes, that raises all sorts of questions. Because they wanted to as it were hold the First Council, as it is called, the sanghiti wanted to recite the teachings as they had remembered them; but who had remembered most? It was Ananda. But then the arhants, so we are told, some of them who were present, especially Kassapa, felt that Ananda had been guilty of serious not breaches of the Precepts; they weren't breaches of the Vinaya rules but certainly that he had been guilty of behaviour [28] which they, the arhants and especially Kassapa, regarded as reprehensible, and they felt that he ought to confess and purify himself before joining the assembly, as it were, and reciting what he remembered of the Buddha's teachings. This raises all sorts of questions about the spiritual status of Ananda. I have sometimes had thoughts about Ananda: whether Ananda wasn't a sort of proto-Mahayanic ..., something of that sort; because Kassapa's attitude seems to have been strict and even rigid. There is a discussion about it in a book called Buddhism: A Mystery Religion?, suggesting that here Ananda is really the archetypal neophyte, who has to go through various trials and tests before he is admitted, before he is initiated. That might throw some light on it. But if we take it at all

literally as a historical episode, in a way Mahakassapa's attitude seems to have been quite unreasonable. One can't help feeling that. So there are some perhaps unsolved questions in connection with that episode. One can't help feeling a certain sympathy for Ananda; and one doesn't feel especially sympathetic towards Kassapa. I must say I haven't finally made up my mind about that episode.

Uttara: Was it maybe not that Ananda had developed a bit of sort of pride in having been the Buddha's personal disciple and so possibly Kassapa was sort of trying to take him down a peg?

S: There is no indication of that. Ananda seems to have been, if anything, quite the opposite sort of person. So if anyone seems to have had pride, it seems to have been, one must say, Kassapa. And Ananda had been recognized as being at least a Stream Entrant; so he wouldn't have had pride in the ordinary human sense. So Ananda seems to have been taken to task for matters which Kassapa might have regarded as serious. For instance, one charge was that, after the Buddha's Parinirvana, he had allowed the tears of some of the women to fall upon the body of the Buddha; the suggestion being that it had been defiled in some way by those tears. But we wouldn't see things quite in that way, would we, I think? So what is Mahakassapa really objecting to? It doesn't seem, really, very Enlightened behaviour. However greatly one might honour the Buddha, are you disrespecting the Buddha, or defiling the Buddha's body can the Buddha's body be defiled by allowing tears, whether of women or of anybody else, to fall upon it? One might have felt that Ananda was showing great sympathy to the women by allowing them to show their grief in that way. The charges seem to be all of that nature. I must say I can't really reconcile myself to Kassapa's attitude. So perhaps there is some other explanation, perhaps there is something in that explanation which Paul Levi, the author of Buddhism: A Mystery Religion? gives. I must say I can't finally resolve the question.

Vessantara: Was the principle underlying your question [answered]?

Douglas: Well, not entirely. It was whether you actually need to see that you have done something wrong. In each of the cases, Ananda is just going on the his trust in the brethren is almost that he doesn't actually see that he has done anything wrong at all, but because he respects them he

S: Ah, yes. I did mention that the occasion, according to the tradition, was that of reciting for the first time the teachings of the Buddha; so maybe Ananda felt that it was important that he should take part in that, because he after all remembered more of the Buddha's teachings than anybody else. So, perhaps, for the sake of being able to contribute his stock of recollections, he agreed to go through those procedures. That is a possibility. In other words, he in a sense sacrificed himself for that purpose. [29] But I would say that, normally, one has to see oneself. I don't think that any confession is meaningful, or any admission of guilt, which you yourself do not actually share. I don't think that anybody, outside certain communist circles or outside the Spanish Inquisition, can demand that you confess something which you honestly feel you have not committed. That is we what we call brainwashing. So I don't think that episode, whatever it might have meant or whatever might have happened, can be used as a reason for insisting that people must confess sins or breaches of Precepts which they don't genuinely recognize as such. They might be wrong in not recognizing but, unless they actually recognize, their confession and repentance cannot be meaningful. You shouldn't

confess and repent just to please someone, or just to keep on the right side of somebody; you should certainly never do that or to remain in somebody's good books, or to give the appearance of being a good boy. Sometimes we know that, to continue to enjoy the approval of the group, people will confess to crimes that they have not committed. That was one of the great lessons of the Moscow treason trials of the 1930s you probably don't remember those, but you must have heard of them: when long-standing members of the Communist Party, of whose fidelity to the party there was absolutely no doubt, confessed to all sorts of crimes against the party; confessed to being agents of the counter-revolution, and all that sort of thing, without it being true at all. The same thing happened at the time of the Cultural Revolution in China; the same thing happened with the Inquisition people confessed to things that they had not committed sometimes, of course, as the result of torture, or sometimes just as the result of brainwashing. Because the last thing you want is to alienate yourself from the group to which you belong, to lose the approval of the group; so, in order to gain it, you will even accuse yourself, and you will say 'Mea culpa, it's my sin,' just so that you remain all right with the group; because if you say, 'Yes, it's my sin,' the group will forgive you and take you back into its bosom, and you will feel, 'Ah! back with the group!' Because your life is with the group, and it is death to be disowned by the group or disapproved of by the group. This is a terrible thing. People will stab themselves to secure the approval of the group; or of other individuals, even. If lovers have a quarrel: 'Oh no, it was my fault, darling, it was my fault' because you have to desperately make things all right again. You don't dare not to make them all right even if you have to call yourself a liar, you will do it, just to make things all right again. You have all gone through this, probably, to some degree, at some time or other! well, in previous lives, then!

: Then, too!

S: It is very difficult to maintain one's own integrity in the face of the group under those sort of conditions. If anybody tries to get you to confess and repent of something that you just really don't see as having been wrong, or when you really don't see that you have actually committed that offence, he is certainly not your spiritual friend, whatever else he may be. That is quite a different thing from trying to point out to you that you have in fact done something unskilful. There shouldn't be any pressure on you to go through the motions of confession and repentance simply to retain the favour of the group or of certain individuals.

Sudhana: So in this situation where one Order Member sees another Order Member has done something wrong, he is not really interested in that person making a confession as such. It's just he might suggest perhaps it's a good idea that he confesses it for his own good, rather than It doesn't make any difference to the Order Member who is trying to help the one who is to make a confession. You just say, 'For your own good, it doesn't make any difference to me personally, but for your own good you should clear this area up.'

[30]
S: Well, yes, obviously that should be one's approach. But if the person who is approached in that way doesn't honestly see that he has committed an unskilful action, obviously he can't proceed with any confession or repentance.

Sudhana: So you would just leave it?

S: I think just leave it. Of course, there may be cases where some overt action has been

committed which is unskilful, and then other people's opinion can be sought; and there may well be a general consensus that that person has in fact committed an unskilful action. But sometimes there are cases which are extremely difficult; one can hardly tell whether the action was unskilful or not. You must have read Asvajit's letter that famous letter from Ceylon, or Sri Lanka I should say, in the last Shabda. You remember that point that one of the crazy people he met in the island hermitage raised about the monk telling the executioner to what was it? just cut off someone's head with one blow? Did you understand the point of that?

: No.

S: I wondered about that. I thought some of you might not. Who thinks they did understand the point of that?

: I haven't had time to read it.

Uttara: I can't remember what the context was.

S: This was quite interesting. It's a classic case, as it were: that is to say, a criminal is about to be executed with a sword. A monk happens to pass by, and out of compassion he says to the executioner: 'Strike off his head with one blow' his intention being that the man should suffer as little as possible. Question: has the bhikkhu committed a breach of the Vinaya and, indirectly, been responsible for the taking of life? Bhikkhus have been discussing this for hundreds of years. Asvajit apparently maintained that the bhikkhu had been motivated by compassion, so he could not have committed an offence: a very Mahayanistic point of view. But the bhikkhu with whom Asvajit was talking retorted: 'There is no compassion in the Vinaya'! (Laughter) or words to that effect, I forget the exact words. So this is quite interesting. But here you might say there was a case where there could be a genuine difference of opinion, depending on whether you were a Mahayanist or a Theravadin, as to whether the bhikkhu had actually broken the Vinaya in making that statement to the executioner. So, if there was disagreement, one would just have to leave it, and no one could insist on a confession even if they didn't feel happy about the particular situation. We get similar discussions in connection with the question of abortion, don't we? There might be differences of opinion with regard to whether, in certain circumstances, an abortion was skilful or unskilful, and it might sometimes be very difficult to unravel the knotty question. But, again, there are other instances where it is very clear that an unskilful action has definitely been committed, and somebody ought to be able to see that.

Uttara: Bhante, there is a section here on the quarrel at Kosambi, and the Buddha does say that the monk has to actually see it as an offence.

S: Yes, right.

Uttara: It goes on to say the reasons why they shouldn't force it upon him, and so after that the schism took place in the Sangha.

[31]
S: This seems to have been what happened in the case of Ananda: he was in a way forced to confess. He says, all right, he confesses out of faith, but I don't see how that is really possible,

not if one takes confession in the full sense. So, taking the incident on its own terms, I can only think that Ananda felt it was of greater importance that he should be admitted to the assembly and allowed to recite what he remembered of the Buddha's teaching for the benefit of all. Taking the story at its face value, that is the only way I can in a way make sense of it; though it may, again, have some quite different significance that I am not aware of. Or we may have lost parts of the story, or something may have got seriously distorted in the transmission.

Uttara: Sometimes it's given that Ananda wasn't Enlightened yet, and [that was] why they told him to go away and purify himself, and in doing that he broke through and attained Enlightenment. At least, I read it that way.

: Well, yes, I think that is one possible explanation: that by being humiliated, so to speak, he gained full Enlightenment. But that is not how it was put. It was put in the form that he had committed various offences. You could have said that was a skilful means on Mahakassapa's part, but it doesn't really look like that to me that sort of explanation to me doesn't really ring true. Unfortunately, it does seem rather in keeping with the somewhat narrow spirit of the later Theravada to regard those actions of Ananda as being of the nature of offences; especially as they don't come under the heading of any particular Vinaya rule. He hadn't broken any Vinaya rule, as far as I recollect, but only committed what Mahakassapa felt were misdemeanours.

Uttara: May I ask a personal question, Bhante? How did you I don't know whether you did commit any offences when you were a monk, but how did you get away with it if you ... ?

S: One can never get away with anything! (Laughter.) I can't remember ever taking part in any formal confession in the real sense, because that tradition had largely been lost. But if there was anything of that sort on my mind, there were certainly people that I could freely mention it to. When I was with Kashyapji, well, there was Kashyapji; when I was in Kalimpong, there was Dardo Rimpoche with whom, for the last 10 years there, I had very regular contact, and whom I knew very well.

Uttara: Because it seemed that you were I don't know whether you were ... the Vinaya, so I don't know how you stood in relationship to

S: Well, I had sometimes the as it were prickings of my own conscience about certain matters that most other bhikkhus didn't bother about at all. For instance, there is this question of eating after 12 o'clock. I pondered about this quite seriously, and for a long time I didn't, literally, eat after 12 o'clock. But after a while I allowed myself, if I had been busy during the morning and I was late back, I did eat at half past 12. But for some time my conscience was troubled by this! But I think on the whole I was in the fortunate position of having contact with people with whom I had a quite satisfactory relationship, and to whom I could talk quite freely about most things, anyway.

Uttara: Was it contact with people who were a bit less rigid in

S: That's true, because Kashyapji, though a Theravadin, certainly wasn't rigid. He was a very liberal-minded Theravadin. And certainly Dardo Rimpoche wasn't at all rigid though serious at the same time. I think they must have been the two people who, in that respect, I had the

greatest confidence in.

[32]
Vessantara: The next question is from Shantipada.

Shantipada: The text mentions that Vakkali committed suicide, and there is a statement by the author of the book later on that, in the case of an arhant, that was all right. I was wondering how you would comment on that.

S: I don't see any reason why arhants shouldn't commit suicide. If any arhant was to ask me I think I'd give that advice! The explanation seems to be, so far as I have gathered, that the arhant and one is only talking about arhants, after all had gained emancipation, but was still linked with the body and was still experiencing intense physical pain; so why should he continue to experience that intense physical pain? If he severed his connection with the body, it wouldn't make any difference to his spiritual state at all. He would be severing that connection quite, so to speak, objectively. That is the traditional view. So I don't see any reason to quarrel with that, actually.

Shantipada: Also, thinking of that point that, for anyone else who has not gained full liberation yet, it would certainly be not advisable, of course.

S: Oh no, that is definitely the corollary. That is also made very clear: that it is only in the case of those who have already attained liberation that that is permissible. I think that is clearly understood.

Side 2

This particular example and this particular discussion are within the context of the Theravada, but in the case of the Mahayana it is, according to some Mahayana sutras, considered permissible to sacrifice one's body for the sake of the Dharma, even quite deliberately. In the Saddharma Pundarika Sutra, there are instances mentioned. There was the monk, I think it was, or Bodhisattva, who in a previous existence had set fire to himself, made himself a sort of human candle, in honour of a certain Buddha. And such texts are the basis of the practice in Chinese Buddhism of setting fire to oneself, as those Vietnamese monks did many years ago, you may remember. So they did it or certainly the first of them did it to draw the attention of the world to the way in which Buddhism was being persecuted in Vietnam; so they did it for the sake of the Dharma. So Mahayana Buddhism regards that as permissible. And this is why, again, when one receives Bodhisattva ordination in the Chinese tradition, and not in the Tibetan tradition, one has three little pills I am not sure what they are made of: wax of some kind like little tiny candles, burned on the top of one's head, so that deep scars are left on one's scalp. That signifies one's readiness even to sacrifice one's body, in a way to burn one's body, for the sake of the Dharma. Most monks have just three, so if you look at the shaven head of a Chinese Mahayana bhikkhu or bhikkhuni, they have got three burn marks, you might say; almost as though a cigarette stub had been pressed against the scalp. Some have five, some have nine. I did see a Chinese monk who had burned himself in that way all over his body, in hundreds of places. He lived in Kusinara. He lived up a tree. (Laughter.) He was called 'the mad monk' he was called Paglavabha(?), the mad monk, by the local Hindu villagers.

[Sin Choon]: That wasn't [Mr] Chen?

S: Oh no, that wasn't Yogi Chen, no. The villagers used to come to him and bring a candle and some money, and he would put the candle on his arm and let it burn down, and the villagers believed that if they prayed for something at that time their prayer would be granted. Strange. But it had that sort of canonical basis.

[33]
Sudhana: Those Chinese monks, Bhante do they follow the Theravada Vinaya ?

S: No, they don't. Another version or another recension of the Vinaya was taken to China; in fact, several recensions belonging to the Sarvastivada. The differences between that Vinaya and the Theravada Vinaya are very minute indeed; for all practical purposes it is the same Vinaya, because that Vinaya tradition antedates the division between the schools, so it is substantially the same for all of them. It is, by the way, a Sarvastivadin version of the Vinaya that found its way to Tibet, also.

Shantipada: I was wondering if you would see the possibility of what I would think of as setting a bad example by committing suicide to people who have not yet gained full liberation; at least it causes some discussion, doesn't it, as in the case of these bhikkhus in Vietnam who burned themselves and [it was] published to the entire world. It throws a bit of an odd light on events, doesn't it?

S: I suppose it depends, to some extent, what one's attitude towards death is. I must admit that, when I read those accounts, and saw especially that famous picture of the old monk, the first one who set fire to himself with kerosene he was sitting cross-legged in the road, and he was completely upright and there were flames all around him I personally felt quite inspired by that, I must admit! I don't know that that would have been everybody's impression, because I think some people might be more frightened by that sort of suicide than if someone had committed suicide for love, or something of that sort. It is strange. Some people could be deeply disturbed. I don't know about the question of example. Because it is unlikely that a lot of other people are going to go and do likewise. There wasn't exactly a wave of suicides, even in Vietnam at that time; there were only, I think, seven monks I am not quite sure seven monks and I think one nun. I don't think it was more than that. And it was in a very extreme situation, where Buddhism was really being persecuted by the Catholic-dominated government of Diem. That was before the communists came into the picture.

Ratnaprabha: Of course, I don't know whether it was as a direct result of those suicides, but I am very sure that, in the years following that, there were quite a number of similar attempted suicides and suicides throughout the world, to draw attention to various political or moral issues. So it could be that some people did follow the example of those monks.

S: But that has happened all the time.

Ratnaprabha: But these were exactly the same kind of suicide: that is, self-immolation in a public place.

S: But, as I say, suicide to draw attention to one's own sufferings or the sufferings of the group to which one belongs has been known for hundreds of years. In Japan, it is very

common, and of course in India, unfortunately, it is very common today among wives who feel badly treated by their husbands or mothers-in-law: they commit suicide. Apparently it is quite a social problem in India today, but nothing to do with the example set by the Vietnamese monks. Apparently there are hundreds of cases every month in India at present it might even be every week but an astonishing number. It has increased, for some reason or other.

Ratnaprabha: Are these all wives?

S: Yes, these are wives. I think in almost all cases. Because in India, usually, the social custom is that after marriage the wife goes and lives with the husband in his house, very often with his mother, and wife and mother don't always get on well [34] together, and sometimes the mother-in-law treats the daughter-in-law very badly, and sometimes they feel the only way out is suicide. It is very common. Padmasuri has written a bit about it, I think. So I think this tendency to what one might call protest suicide is a quite common social phenomenon in some cultures, no doubt, more than others. So I doubt if it can be really traced to the Vietnamese monks, except perhaps in a few politically significant cases perhaps. In Chinese Buddhist history there were a number of quite famous cases of suicides of this sort committed by monks. Certainly not thousands of them, but at least some scores. While I am on the subject, this introduces almost the question of religious suicide, because there are some communities in India, among the Hindus, who formerly at least used to commit ritual suicide by throwing themselves under the wheels of the car of Jagannath at Puri during the great festival. This was regarded as a very auspicious death. So there is this sort of streak, almost, in human nature under certain circumstances to offer yourself, to immolate yourself, to offer yourself as a sacrifice.

Uttara: There were the famous American I think it was American suicides of a whole sect.

S: Yes, that's true. But that seems to have been more in desperation. But it was a very big one, wasn't it? But to come back to this question of example everything that one does, in a sense, is an example, and the whole question of example, especially spiritual example or good example, is a quite interesting one. To what extent should you behave, or not behave, as an example to others? But anyway, that is perhaps a separate question. You certainly, I think, shouldn't behave in a certain way simply in order to give a good example to others; otherwise everybody will be giving good examples to others, just for the sake of giving good examples to others; so there will be no real meaning in one's ethical or spiritual life in that case. It will be a bit like The Man who was Thursday.

: Mm? (Laughter.)

S: Oh dear. G. K. Chesterton's story, The Man who was Thursday. Apparently a man joined a sort of secret political society. There were only seven members, and they were named after the days of the week, and he was given the title Thursday. It was supposed to be a subversive society, deeply subversive; but Thursday actually was an agent, a government agent, infiltrating this subversive group. In the end, the story goes, he discovered they all discovered that they were all government agents! (Laughter.) Not a single one of them was really subversive. So it is a bit like that, you could say. Yes, setting a good example to everybody else, but no one is actually the real thing! So, yes, one should not be unaware of the effect of one's behaviour or one's example, even, on other people; but I don't think you can orient your

behaviour entirely by that criterion. Anyway, perhaps we should pass on.

Shantipada: I would like to come once more back to [that subject]. I was especially thinking of the effect of setting a bad example because the Buddha, when he explained the Second Noble Truth, said that one cause of suffering was the desire for nonexistence. So that is quite a critical point for people who have not reached the stage of ...

[35]
S: Yes, indeed. But, you see, there are two things. There is desire for existence and there is desire for nonexistence. So if you commit suicide you could be encouraging the desire for nonexistence, that is true; but, on the other hand, by going on living you encourage the desire for existence! (Laughter.) So you are in a dilemma, aren't you, because you can hardly avoid doing either the one or the other. We are all setting a very bad example! We are encouraging people to go on desiring to live. So perhaps it isn't a very bad idea to have at least a few people who are setting the opposite example, just to balance things up a bit!

Uttara: I think there is a Zen story where the monk asks the master for some teachings, he wants to know the truth; and the master sticks his head under the water, and the monk is splashing for breath, and when he comes up [the master] says 'What were you desiring?' He says, 'I was looking for breath.' [The master] says, 'Well, if you desire the truth '

S: That's right, yes: with that degree of intensity that you desired air, you are on the right path. You've got to transpose your desire for life to the spiritual plane, the spiritual level. But as I said, this whole question of setting an example is a very complex one. I think we won't go into it now, but I think some time we have to go into it. I have not really dealt with it, I think, so far. I mean setting an example in a very general sort of way: setting an example as a sort of criterion or motivation, say, for certain kinds of desirable behaviour.

Vessantara: ..., did you have a question?

: That one has evaporated.

Vessantara: Douglas.

Douglas: It is a question on sex, actually. It's basically one of the four ways you can be expelled from the Order ... it is a sexual ... It's more harking back to whether sex is actually a good thing for people to actually engage in; we had quite a long discussion about it. So I'd like to read the question. Apart from possible feelings of guilt that might be associated with sexual activity, there seem to be objective reasons why it might not be a good thing to engage in, from a spiritual point of view. It seems to entail a certain deterioration in one's mental state. Would you say that that is necessarily the case, and if so why does that happen?

S: Someone has been reading Is Sex Compulsory?! Say that again.

Douglas: The whole thing?

S: No, just that about deterioration, did you say?

Douglas: Yes: it seems to entail a certain deterioration in one's mental state. Do you think that

is necessarily the case and, if so, why?

S: I suppose the operative word here is 'necessarily'. It is also a question of degree, isn't it? The author of that book which I mentioned does cite some very interesting evidence, as it seems to be, to the effect that expenditure of energy in sex does result in at least some degree of loss of mental energy and vigour and [36] brightness, as it were. Whether that actually is the case for everybody, I suppose one just has to observe oneself on such occasions, and try to see what is actually happening, quite honestly. One doesn't have to take it just because it is found in some book but the author of this book does also point out that it is a sort of traditional wisdom, say, for athletes and other such people to abstain from sex before an important race or match or something of this sort. And I think in all primitive societies warriors used to abstain from sex before going into battle, or before their dances and so on. So I think there very likely is at least a tendency of that sort, especially where sexual activity is excessive whatever that may be for a particular person. So I think, at the very least, if one does engage in sexual activity, one needs to be mindful about its effect on oneself in every respect. It is very difficult to establish a logically watertight case, because you might, for instance, find that some people are mentally alert and so on, mentally active, even though they do lead quite active sex lives; but then it could be argued that they would be even more mentally active, even brighter, if they were celibate. One, I suppose, just has to go by one's own experience, in the long run; but certainly not ignore, say, traditional wisdom and the sort of evidence that has been adduced in this book. I think that, to say the least, it is extremely unlikely that sexual activity increases one's mental efficiency. But anyway no doubt most people have some experience of their own to fall back on and reflect upon; so perhaps that is what one should do.

Uttara: I know at the time I was in the running club, it was a question that I would always have in my mind, and I would ask people what they thought, how they coped with it, did they have sex or they didn't; and there were mixed ideas about it. I myself ended up avoiding sex.

S: Maybe the Glasgow Marathon was the biggest boost that celibacy had ever been given in that city! One must study one's own experience, be open to possibilities.

Uttara: I think this is possibly one reason why all the wives were complaining so much about their husbands running

S: Well, according again to the author of this book, some wives would have been very glad to have them out of the way!

Padmapani: Bhante, I have been reading recently in my research into folklore and ritual, [that] the king is given the role of king because of his particular prowess in sexuality, and is usually seen as the leader of a clan or a tribe. I am just trying to fit that in with what you have just been saying, in the sense that it takes away that leadership, takes away that brightness or that clarity. Surely the king would be in a way the top of the pile?

S: Not necessarily. That was more often the witch doctor or the wizard. No, it depends what level of society, what level of civilization one is considering. No doubt in very primitive societies importance is attached to virility and all that sort of thing, and has certain symbolical associations. But I don't think one can draw any conclusions from that with regard to the sort of questions we have just been discussing. I think one is dealing with a quite different level of

social life and even civilization. Kings on the whole have just tended to take advantage of the opportunities that they had. Even in modern times they sometimes do that.

Padmapani: I suppose I meant it in the sense that the person could only retain his kingship if he could sleep with as many people as he could in other words, he -

[37]
S: I have never heard of any society where that was an actual requirement ?

Padmapani: In some of these African tribes, yes.

S: But how did they estimate? Were there trials or tests before they were made king? Quite a lot of kings didn't last very long, anyway! (Laughter). There was the ritual thing: after being king for a year, he was sacrificed. James Frazer has gone into all that, hasn't he? No doubt he made hay while the sun shone! No, I think we need more precise information or more precise evidence before we can connect anything of that sort with the question of the general desirability or otherwise of celibacy. Just to touch on something different, under some regimes, those who were associated with the king sometimes, of course, did encourage him to amuse himself in this way so that power was left in their hands. That has been a common ploy to keep the king's hands away from the levers of power. So that technique might have been used even at a very early stage of society; who knows? Witch doctors and wizards and so on were no fools.

Padmapani: In [that] case, that would be the opposite to what

S: Mm?

Padmapani: Presumably, by having sex, the king would not only be preoccupied but would become rather dull.

S: He would be stupefied! Yes.

Ratnaprabha: Presumably, Bhante, a king would be chosen for virility because virility is associated with prowess in battle, associated with physical strength.

S: Is it? Some warriors

Ratnaprabha: In people's minds, yes.

S: I am not even sure of that; because some warriors had a reputation for chastity, didn't they?

Ratnaprabha: But chastity isn't necessarily opposed to virility. Virility is your prowess, not necessarily what you actually do.

S: How do you know that someone has virility unless he actually gives some sign or evidence of it?

Ratnaprabha: Right, hmm.

S: In a way I think there was, if anything, a greater association of being a warrior with at least a temporary celibacy or chastity, for the sake of conserving energy rather than expending it.

Padmapani: We are only talking about one sex, the male in this case. Usually it seems like the women seem to actually have a lot more energy after

S: Well, in normal circumstances it at once goes into pregnancy. Doesn't it? But I think one should be careful just trying to draw conclusions from a sort of scattering of evidence from various sources; and I think basically one has just to observe and study one's own experience. The caveman's experience may have been quite different, and the medieval warrior's experience may have been quite different; but what about [38] one's own experience? Where does, say, sex leave you? That is the really important question.

Douglas: Bhante, thinking in terms of the elements in the stupa that is what I was thinking about in this question, it seems like the elements of the stupa represent sort of energy in ascending forms of subtlety.

S: Right.

Douglas: It could be that sexual activity of has this deteriorating effect on one because it involves lower, more coarse forms of energy.

S: Well, that would seem in a way to naturally follow. Though I suppose some people at least would say that if you do to a great extent live on those lower levels you cannot help expressing yourself on those levels. It is not possible to, to use that term, sublimate all your energies at once. But at least we have to be sure that that process of as it were sublimation is going on all the time, and that our energies are on the whole becoming progressively more and more refined. As I think I mentioned some days ago, it might be interesting if at the end of this retreat people just sort of took stock of themselves from this point of view. I have often noticed that people at the end of a three-month retreat usually look so bright, so much brighter than when they arrived. And I don't think it is just the meditation and study and good fellowship; I think it also, to some extent at least, is due to the fact that they have been virtually celibate for three whole months, which for some people might be a comparatively novel experience at least so far as their adult period is concerned. Just to mention this book again, I think one of its important points is that it does tend to refute the notion that sex is necessarily good for you and therefore that the more of it the better the more you have the better you will feel. I think it does seem to have exploded that myth. Maybe it is, for the ordinary person, a little bit like salt: you can't make a meal of it, but maybe just a tiny pinch every now and then won't do too much harm! Maybe one should consider these revolutionary ideas. They might have Well, be heretical! People are always talking about going against orthodoxy and rebelling and breaking down barriers well, break down all these sort of rigid pseudo-libertarian barriers! Rebel against the current sexual orthodoxy! (Laughter). Be celibate you know be a real heretic! Don't let anyone brainwash you into thinking that sex is good for you! Don't let anyone convince you that you are enjoying yourself when you are not! (Laughter.) Don't take anything for granted. People are so easily brainwashed, or conditioned. It happens with every generation. The conditioning may vary, but it is usually a conditioning all the same. If you are born in this decade you are a puritan; if you are born in the next decade, you are thoroughly promiscuous! It is all just according to your conditioning. If most of us had been born, say, 100, 120 years ago, we would all be good Victorians, probably.

Anyway, let's pass on. Does that deal with the question? Perhaps not very satisfactorily, but one can't as it were disregard the personal factor. Everybody, as I said, just has to reflect on and study his own personal experience, and draw whatever conclusions are most conducive to his particular spiritual development.

Sanghapala: Bhante, when monk Vakkali committed suicide, the Buddha sees Mara casting around in all directions looking for his consciousness. I would assume that that Mara is Macchu Mara?

S: No, because the monk is dead already, so I assume it must have been Devaputra Mara. I won't be too sure of that, but that is how it seems to me.

[39]
Sanghapala: He takes the form of a cloud.

S: Well, the Buddha had a sort of visionary experience; but Blake, for instance, had lots of visionary experiences. When you have visionary experiences you translate spiritual perceptions into visual terms. It is not that the Buddha saw a dark cloud that a meteorologist, had he been looking around through a telescope, would have also noticed; do you see what I mean? But a sort or black cloud appeared before the Buddha's inner spiritual vision, much in the same way that William Blake saw the ghost of a flea and drew it. But some people have this sort of visionary faculty: they translate what I call spiritual perceptions into actual visual forms. Some people have this faculty very strongly. Well, as I mentioned, Blake had it, Swedenborg had it. Sometimes you yourself, you might be thinking and you may not actually see something in the literal sense, almost, that the Buddha or Blake seem to have seen it, but you form a sort of mental picture of something, you don't just think about it in abstract terms.

Sanghapala: Do you think that is what omens are, Bhante? When someone perhaps has an intuition and then they

S: I think you are talking about a premonition. Because an omen is usually something quite external, something material, something visible to all like the flight of birds overhead, flying in a particular direction. That would be regarded as an omen. Or if you break a mirror, that is an omen.

Sanghapala: Does that mean that, yes, they are external, one is carrying on in the usual manner, sees, say, an eagle overhead, and then decides that it means something; or is it that one is having an experience, sees the eagle overhead and then in terms of a certain ...

S: No, usually an omen is understood to be an external occurrence of that kind which is then interpreted as having a certain meaning. That is the traditional understanding of omens.

Padmapani: Bhante, that illustration that Sanghapala has just given it goes on to say: 'Bhikkhus, do you see that smoky haze, that sombre shadow?' and they say 'Yes, Lord.' So does that mean that the Buddha could relay that inner spiritual experience to the other monks, or what?

S: I wouldn't say so much that, but perhaps the other monks shared that kind of spiritual perception and could translate it into the same visual terms; or that they understood the

Buddha's language. For instance, we have this idiom 'Do you see it? Do you see?', in the sense of 'Do you understand?' The Buddha could have meant 'Do you understand?' not literally, necessarily, 'Do you see?' They seem to have known what the Buddha was talking about.

Padmapani: Oh yes, they did.

S: Especially if they were Enlightened monks, they would be on the same level of spiritual perception, more or less, as the Buddha himself, and would be able to 'see', whether literally or metaphorically, whatever it was that the Buddha saw when he pointed it out.

Padmapani: It does raise an interesting question, doesn't it? that, as a group, so to speak, of so-called individuals, we can in a way experience things that other people can't experience.

[40]
S: Well, members of a spiritual community, one would expect, can have common spiritual perceptions. In a way one would expect that. It would be surprising if it was otherwise, one might say.

Sanghapala: Bhante, why would Mara be casting around for the consciousness of Vakkali?

S: Well, he would want to see whether it was free or not free; because, if it wasn't free, it was under his sway. He just wanted to see whether anyone was escaping at that moment. You can just imagine him, can't you? Can't you just see him, like a black cloud just searching here and there? There is something like that in The Lord of the Rings, isn't there? Can any of you remember it?

Voices: Yes.

S: What is it?

: Sauron, the dark cloud. The nazgul.(?)

S: Or, if you regarded the entire episode as to be understood just metaphorically, not to be taken literally, it would just be a way of expressing the fact that Vakkali had attained liberation and the conditioned had no further power over him. The Buddha recognized that, the bhikkhus recognized that. That would be the essence of the matter, regardless of the way in which it was presented.

Chakkhupala: In that sense, then, it could be Macchu Mara in the sense that he [Vakkali] had attained the deathless; so surely he was

S: Yes, if you just understood it metaphorically, yes, it could be Macchu Mara that he had escaped from the power of death.

Chakkhupala: Following on from that, I find it quite difficult to distinguish between a spiritual perception which is translated into visual imagery and expressed that way, and an Insight which might be an understanding which is given expression in metaphorical language. I find it very difficult to separate the two. Can you give an example?

S: I am not quite sure which two you are talking about.

Chakkhupala: That the Buddha had a spiritual experience he did have an experience of Mara which he expressed in terms of being a sombre shadow, a dark cloud; as against the Buddha saying, 'Monks, the world is burning.' At that moment do you see what I'm getting at? did the Buddha see flames, did he have a spiritual experience and see flames, or did he have the Insight into the process of change which he translated into the metaphor of fire?

S: I still don't see the point of the difference.

Chakkhupala: Well, perhaps there isn't a difference!

S: It does seem, though, that there are some people who tend to translate their spiritual perceptions, as I have called them, into visual terms, whereas others do not. Perhaps it is only a so to speak psychological difference. Or perhaps one translates one's spiritual perceptions into visual terms under certain circumstances and not others. It doesn't seem that the Buddha invariably did that; so it is not easy to tell what is the relation between those two things, if in fact they are two [41] things. But they seem very often to go together, or the one seems to run quite naturally into the other, at least for some people, at least under certain circumstances. Perhaps it might again be interesting just to reflect on and study one's own experience. When one is thinking, especially about, say, dharmic matters or philosophical matters, just try to observe to what extent any, let's say, understanding or intuition you have translates itself into visual terms, into visual imagery. I think with some people that does happen quite a lot; with others, perhaps, not so much. Some people almost think in terms of visual imagery; there isn't as it were that preceding stage of what one might call abstract spiritual perception. For instance, there was the case or example, two or three years ago, of someone giving talks, who gave them entirely in visual and imaginative terms, without any sort of concept, hardly. But that is comparatively rare. For instance, if you are writing something, or maybe if you preparing a talk, you may be thinking relatively abstractly and then suddenly that whole train of thought translates itself into an image, into a simile, which illumines the whole train of thought and gives it a fuller expression. Very often one finds that. So, instead of having what one might call an abstract perception, one has a very concrete one

Side 2

In terms of or in the form of that particular image or simile. Because occasionally people sort of fake it a bit; say, bring in an elaborate description of a Bodhisattva right at the end of their talk a bit like a peacock's feathers stuck on the rump of a chicken! (Laughter.) Well, sometimes it does seem a little bit like that. It is not that it is growing or flowing naturally out of the talk; it is just stuck on at the end in a rather obvious fashion. But I think some people, it would seem again I mention Blake almost literally see the visual form into which they have translated their abstract intuitive spiritual perception. Have we really dealt with the question?

Chakkhupala: I don't think so. Just taking this episode, we have this hazy shadow: was it the Buddha as it were having a Blakean vision, or was there actually an existent Devaputta Mara that the Buddha perceived in an act of perception? Do you see what I mean?

S: This raises the question: is Mara a black cloud? No, Mara isn't a black cloud, he is a Devaputra. So the Buddha perceives Mara the Devaputra, but he translates, so to speak, or his

mind translates, that perception into the visual terms of the black cloud. One could put it in that way.

Chakkhupala: That leaves me more confused than previously. Why didn't he just describe him as he was?

S: Well, as I've said, the question perhaps of temperaments does come in. Perhaps, in the case of some people, a spiritual perception flows more naturally, or is more naturally translated, into visual images than in the case of others. It is very difficult to account for this. As I have mentioned in the case of a talk that you might be writing or an essay, sometimes the visual images just sort of come. Maybe it happened like that with the Buddha, too. He could presumably have said, 'Mara is around,' without having recourse to that image of the black cloud; but perhaps that [42] is just how he saw Mara. Not that Mara was a black cloud, but that is the form under which he perceived him. One can't even be sure, say, that the two stages, if there were two stages, were sort of successive. There might have been intuition of the presence of Mara and of a perception of him as a black cloud, taking place simultaneously. We do have analogous expressions when we say that 'The air was blue'. So, supposing you become aware, in some situation, that the air is blue; you would first of all presumably perceive that the air was blue and then you would proceed to ask yourself 'Why is it blue?' and you would then presumably have some understanding of the nature of the situation which had led to that particular perception. So perhaps the Buddha's mind worked that way; perhaps he did have an experience of a black cloud on whatsoever level, with whatsoever degree of literalness, and then he understood, either subsequently or at that very instant, that 'That is Mara'. We aren't told, in that kind of detail, so we don't really know; we can only examine the possibilities. But I think it is clear that some people do, at least on some occasions, more readily translate, if that is the word, their perceptions into visual terms, and have visual experiences of varying degrees of vividness.

Ratnaprabha: Bhante, could you say a little more about exactly what you mean by 'a spiritual perception'? I didn't quite understand that.

S: I suppose I mean, broadly speaking, a perception, if that is the word, of something non-material. Because Mara didn't have a gross physical body, but the Buddha perceived him. I suppose also, in the way in which I used that expression, I was contrasting what I called the spiritual perception with its translation into visual terms, so in that particular context I was thinking of it as something so to speak abstract.

Ratnaprabha: Is it normally that one would perceive something that is non-material by as it were some subtle sense, and then one's tendency perhaps would be to translate it into terms which were either more familiar to one or more communicable to others mainly into terms associated with one of the concrete material senses?

S: That would seem to be what takes place, at least sometimes, but not that that excludes the possibilities; because you can, it seems, have an experience of the sort of abstract spiritual perception first, and then, in a sense almost literally, subsequently translate that into visual terms; or you can have both together; or you can even have the visual experience first and then read it in such a way as to give you its significance, much as you read a printed page and understand the meaning. There seem to be those possibilities.

Ratnaprabha: We sometimes speak of having subtle senses, almost as if there were a subtle visual sense, a subtle smell sense, a subtle hearing sense and so on. But is it more as if there can be subtle perception, which we can think of or even directly experience in terms which are very similar to the terms that we see things or hear things on the material level, rather than there being five subtle senses?

S: I think you are probably mixing up two things, because there is said to be a subtle sense of sight whereby you actually perceive material things at a distance; that is one kind of subtle sense. But then there is the other, in which you use expressions like spiritual perception or spiritual sight as it were metaphorically, to indicate understanding. That would seem to be actually what you were referring to.

Ratnaprabha: So your use of the phrase spiritual perception is actually

S: of the second kind.

[43]
Ratnaprabha: an understanding of something being the case; not a sort of sensory perception, even on a subtle level?

S: Except metaphorically. One cannot but speak metaphorically, because all our expressions are derived originally from sense experience. So all our language with regard to non-material reality, to use that expression, cannot but be metaphorical. Hence we speak of 'seeing' the truth; even 'hearing' the truth. We don't usually speak of smelling it, but there is no logical reason why we shouldn't, as one of the sutras makes quite clear.

Ratnaprabha: There is an untruth that you smell. (Laughter.) You say you smell a rat, don't you?

S: Smell a rat, yes. Anyway oh! how many questions left?

Vessantara: Just a couple of

S: We had better polish them off, then.

: Incidentally, Bhante, do you get anywhere in Buddhism representations of the four Maras?

S: Representations? I suppose that, strictly speaking, only Devaputra Mara could be represented I believe he is represented well, yes, he is represented in scenes depicting the Enlightenment of the Buddha.

Vessantara: Then you get the four Maras of the set, given form.

S: They are not given form, not to the best of my knowledge, though they are often enumerated as a set very often. I suppose you could personify them, but that would be misleading because you might give the impression that there are four different Devaputra Maras. Of course, there are different Maras: beings belonging to the race of Mara, so to speak, with different proper names. But that is another matter.

Sumana: There is a section in this chapter dealing with evidences and certainties about the Three Jewels, and part of the evidence cited in the section is 'The teacher showed me the Law at each successively higher stage ... superior level, with dark and bright counterparts.' I wondered what these dark and bright counterparts [were]?

S: Yes, I was wondering about that. I have not been able to think what they might be. I have never come across any explanation though dark and bright are often synonyms for punya and papa. But what these counterparts are just isn't clear. So I must admit I haven't been able to attach any meaning to that expression. Again, it might be a help to look up the original Pali term; I don't recollect what that is. But I doubt even if that by itself would throw much light on the matter. No, it is that word 'counterparts' which causes the trouble.

Ratnaprabha: I've got the Pali here, Bhante. It is sapatti bhauga(??).

S: Ah, then that is counterpart in the literal sense.

Ratnaprabha: And Mrs Horner, in the other translation, says that it means in this case 'fruits'; and she seems to disagree with Nanamoli's translation, so she says it's about 'the dark and [44] bright, and their counterparts in addition', not 'the dark and bright counterparts' but 'the dark and bright and their counterparts'; and 'their counterparts', she says, means 'their fruits'.

S: Read that little section and let us see whether that makes sense.

Ratnaprabha: Nanamoli's translation is 'The Teacher showed me the Law at each successively higher stage, at each superior level, with dark and bright counterparts.' I haven't got the exact words in Mrs Horner's translation, but it is something like 'The Teacher showed me the Law ... with dark and bright and their counterparts.'

S: It couldn't be 'fruits', because at those higher levels you wouldn't have dark fruits in addition to the counterparts. Presumably on those higher levels you would have only bright fruits and their counterparts; but even that doesn't seem to help very much.

Ratnaprabha: That's all I've got on it. There are one or two other notes, I think, in Mrs Horner's translation, but I haven't actually got them down here.

S: It is Miss Horner, actually. She would be very annoyed if (Laughter.) She is very much a spinster lady. But that will probably need thinking about, to see if one could get some meaning out of that.

: Do you think, Bhante, that it could be 'bright and brighter', so that the brighter against the lesser bright would seem dark?

S: But one has to bear in mind the whole context. That doesn't seem to help. No, I will just have to think about it some more.

Uttara: Is it not negative and positive counterparts, i.e. in terms of the Precepts, something like that?

S: But you are going higher and higher, and it is difficult to understand how there could be

bright positive and negative counterparts at each higher stage. What are those?

Vessantara: I think perhaps what Uttara is suggesting is that it is the negative Precepts and the positive Precepts that is, the versions couched in negative terms and the versions couched in positive terms.

S: Well, read the sentence and see whether that makes sense.

Vessantara: 'The Teacher showed me the Law at each successively higher stage, at each superior level, with dark and bright counterparts.'

S: It could mean something like that; though isn't the context jhanic rather than that of the Precepts? Or is that not stated?

Vessantara: No, it just says: 'I approached the Blessed One for the sake of hearing the Law. The Teacher showed me the Law at each successively higher stage.' And later on it says: 'According as he did so, by arriving at direct knowledge here of a certain idea (namely, one of the four stages in the path of realization) among the ideas taught in the Law, I reached my goal; then I had confidence in my teacher'.

S: Ah, then it makes it quite difficult to understand; because if it is those four stages which are the four paths that is to say, the Stream Entrant and so on - how [45] can there be a question of a dark counterpart? Because there would seem to be a steady increase of brightness, so to speak.

Vessantara: I had assumed 'the four stages' meant sila, samadhi, prajna and vimutti.

S: No; it seems to me that it is the srotapanna and so on. In that case, prajna and vimutti, even, would not have dark counterparts would not possess dark counterparts; because it says 'with counterpart'. So I am afraid we aren't really any the wiser. So let's leave that, and come on to the last question.

Silananda(?): I wonder if you could shed light on another very obscure expression. It is used by Uttara when he is describing the Buddha, ... not our Uttara but the historic Uttara. I will read the last sentence: 'He looks a plough-yoke's length before him; beyond that he has the vision of unhindered knowledge.' I was wondering what this 'vision of unhindered knowledge' is that he has ... ahead of himself.

S: Yes, that is rather odd, because a monk is supposed to walk along looking a certain distance, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground. It is rather an odd expression, because on the one hand you are concerned with something apparently physical, and on the other with something as it were spiritual.

Silananda: It seems that virtually all of Uttara's descriptions are sort of purely physical, so if this one is more than that it would be, it seems, out of keeping with his human descriptive powers.

S: Yes, indeed. Just mention that phrase again: '... and beyond that '?

Silananda: ' beyond that he has the vision of unhindered knowledge.'

S: 'Beyond that.'

Silananda: Beyond the plough-yoke's length ahead of him.

Uttara: Is it mindfulness of purpose?

S: But why the association, then, with the plough's length ahead of him? It could mean of in addition to that; he is walking along very mindfully, and he is keeping his gaze fixed a plough's length ahead of him; and then, in addition to that, he is immersed in a certain spiritual state or experience. Not beyond, in a sort of spatial sense, but beyond in the sense of some other dimension. One could look at it in that way, but certainly, as translated, it seems a very awkward expression. Clearly, there were two things there his mindfulness with regard to his walking and keeping his eyes down, on the other there is a definite spiritual experience. But the text, at least as far as the translation is concerned, seems to relate these two in a rather awkward way. There seems to be the wrong preposition here.

Sanghapala: Bhante, do you think it was something that was put in later?

S: Well, one can always invoke that explanation! that is why (?) you should give it a bit more thought first.

Sanghapala: I had given it a bit more thought. It doesn't seem to affect the ...

[46]
S: No, I think that is rather a counsel of despair, that something was a later addition. It might be; but I think one shouldn't invoke that explanation too quickly. Just think about it for a few years first!

Douglas: I was thinking that there was a certain connection, quite a poetic connection; in the one, he is sort of aware of his physical space, and beyond that he has got this spiritual awareness.

S: Yes, we do in English use the expression 'beyond' in a non-spatial sense, don't we? That is why I said 'in addition to'; 'above that', 'above and beyond that'. It is more like that; that he did read it like that, with that expression, 'above and beyond'.

Silananda: 'He looks a plough-yoke's length before him; above and beyond that, he has the vision of unhindered knowledge.'

S: Yes! That does make more sense, doesn't it? It is as if to say, on an entirely different level, so to speak, he has that experience, yes: above and beyond the level on which he is simply walking along, keeping his eyes fixed a plough's length ahead of him. Perhaps it is a question of finding the right corresponding idiom for the Pali idiom; perhaps 'above and beyond' is a better rendering than just 'beyond'.

Uttara: Bhante, why would I think this came up in our study group today why would an Enlightened being need to remain mindful?

S: Well, it depends what one means by 'need'.

Uttara: Or, no, in that way, ...

S: It is difficult to imagine an Enlightened not being mindful. It's as though they don't have a free choice, as it were; they cannot but be mindful.

Uttara: It wouldn't be a consciousness of 'I have to guard the doors of the senses, so therefore I walk with my gaze a plough's length in front.'

S: With regard to all Precepts, they have two forms: there is a disciplinary form, where you practise them deliberately and maybe with effort and difficulty; and then a sort of natural spontaneous form, where you practise them as the natural expression of your own mental state. So it's the same with mindfulness: you can practise mindfulness as a discipline, with effort and struggle, or you can just be mindful because that is the way you are without any effort, without any struggle. Anyway, perhaps we should be mindful of the time. Is that the lot?

Vessantara: That's the lot, yes.

S: All right, then.

Voices: Thank you, Bhante.

Spellchecked and put into house style, Shantavira November 1998