Lecture 5: the Nature and Development of Buddhism

Sometimes it happens in the course of our study of Buddhism - this is the experience of many of us, especially at the beginning - that we cannot see the wood for the trees. In a sense rather different from the sense in which I shall use this expression later on, there's no such thing as Buddhism for the beginner. He goes along perhaps hoping to hear about Buddhism, but he's either given a discourse on the Theravada or on Zen or on Tibetan Buddhism, but he seems never to get anywhere near Buddhism. He hears a lot about morality, a lot about meditation, a lot about wisdom, a lot about philosophy, a lot about mindfulness, but it doesn't always seem to hang together in one organic relationship. There are lots of trees, as it were, but no wood.

So the beginner very often becomes confused, even lost, and he wanders sometimes, very disconsolately and very confused. I've found people in this plight at the summer school. You probably know, as I've mentioned before, the summer school, to which some of us will be going later on this week, is a very wonderful institution, people enjoy it very much, but after a few days you find some of them wandering about in the rather extensive grounds in a condition of what one might describe almost as punch drunk. They've been hit by Zen, and Zen as you know packs a very powerful punch. They've been caught on the rebound, as it were, by Theravada, which is also pretty stiff and strong, and then the Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism also sometimes, and so they just stagger about the compound with a glazed look in their eyes, murmuring or muttering to themselves `Zen, Theravada, Tibetan Buddhism'.

But Buddhism itself, it seems, swims into their ken very late in their Buddhist career. So sometimes therefore, it's very good, at least periodically, to take what we may call a bird's eye view of the whole terrain, to forget about this school and that school, this doctrine and that doctrine, this teaching and that teaching, and try to have a sort of universal conspectus of the whole vast field, to try to get up and up and have a sort of - bird's eye view is perhaps a figure of speech rather out of date, you might say astronaut's eye view - of this cosmos of Buddhism. And this is what we're going to do, or try to do, very briefly, this afternoon. It's very useful, we may say, to have a sort of general historical framework within which one can fit all the information one acquires, all the insights one acquires, as regards the teaching of the Buddha. So that's what we're going to do this afternoon when we study the nature and the development of Buddhism.

Now first of all the nature of Buddhism. What is Buddhism in its ultimate essence? What does it really mean? What is really behind it? Whence does it really spring? I remember - these sorts of comparisons come naturally to mind - I remember that not so very many weeks ago I was at a place called Delphi. Some of you may have heard of that place. It's a place where in ancient times there was the oracle of the god Apollo. So I remember that when we were looking over that place, when we were just walking through the olive trees on the slopes of the hill on which Delphi stands, we came across a little spring. So this little spring of water was bubbling very vigorously from rock to rock in a sort of little cascade and one didn't at first pay it any great attention. But later on one found that the same little cascade reappeared higher up - it was falling down from different levels. And then one went higher up still and one found that this was none other than the famous Castellian spring. If you drink it you're supposed to become a poet on the spot. And it welled out from between two great rocks, two cliffs almost, in a very mysterious sort of way - you couldn't quite see where it came from or how it came. So in this way we tracked back this little spring to its source.

In the same way we can trace back, we can track back, Buddhism to its source, its very deep source, in a way its very mysterious source. And what is that? What is the ultimate source of Buddhism itself? The ultimate source of Buddhism, we may say, that which constitutes in the deepest sense the nature of Buddhism, that from which Buddhism in its entirety starts; to change one's figure of speech, the germ or the seed of Buddhism, whence the whole mighty tree and expanded, is the Buddha's spiritual, if you like transcendental, experience - what we call the experience of sambodhi, or supreme perfect Enlightenment. Everything comes out of that. Sometimes the connection may not be very clear. Sometimes the living waters of

Buddhism get as it were lost among the stones and the sand. But if you follow, if you trace back, if you track back, then sooner or later one comes to this living, this ever-living source and fount, that is, the spiritual experience of the Buddha himself, his experience of supreme perfect Enlightenment, by virtue of which he did become the being whom we call Buddha, Enlightened, awake, aware.

And what we call Buddhism, what is traditionally called the Dharma in Sanskrit, Dhamma in Pali, chur in Tibetan, is only - though perhaps one shouldn't use the word only - but it is essentially the sum total of all the different ways in which the Buddha and his disciples after him strove to communicate to others some hint, some suggestion, of that experience, so that they might be inspired, might be helped eventually to have, to know, that experience for themselves. That's why, if we leave aside for the moment all the complexity of Buddhism, all the schools and the systems, the teachings, the doctrines, the philosophies, it's a very simple matter. Buddhism, the Dharma, the way of the Buddha, is nothing else than simply the means to this experience, the way to Enlightenment.

It's very easy to forget this. It's very easy to become preoccupied with Buddhist culture, or with languages, with history of Buddhism and so on. But basically and essentially Buddhism is nothing but the means to Enlightenment, the way to Enlightenment, for each one of us.

Now, the fact that Buddhism itself is not an end in itself, is only a means to an end, is brought out very powerfully, even dramatically, in a number of passages in the scriptures, most of which I'm sure are quite well known to most of you because I dwell upon them - I insist upon them, in fact - frequently in various ways. The famous parable of the raft: this is one of the parables of the Buddha which one always tells to newcomers because it does convey so explicitly, so concretely, what in fact Buddhism is, what it's trying to do. It's simply a raft. It's simply something to get you across to the other shore.

This shore of course represents our present ego-bound existence, with its suffering, its disharmony. And the other shore of course represents what we aspire to be, what we ideally are, our goal; in other words Enlightenment or Nirvana or the Dharmakaya, or whatever else one cares or wishes to call it. And Buddhism is simply that raft which carries one over the intervening waters from this shore to that shore. That's its only function. And as the Buddha himself explicitly tells his monks in this very same passage, when you get to the other shore, you don't need the raft. The raft, he said, I teach as something to be left behind. So to put that into more contemporary phraseology, religion itself is something to be left behind, it's a means to an end, that end of course being Enlightenment.

Then think of those marvellous words of the Buddha to his aunt and foster-mother Mahaprajapati Gotami. Even in the Buddha's day Buddhism had become a bit confused. There were many apparently contradictory versions. One disciple said this, another disciple said that. So even someone who was so close to the Buddha as his own aunt and fostermother, who had followed in his footsteps later on and become a nun, and was dwelling in the forest - even someone of that calibre could become confused. So she went to the Buddha, she asked him personally, how are we to know your teaching? How are we to know what you really taught? - the same question that people often ask today. What did the Buddha really teach? How can we know his teaching? How can we recognize it?

So she was in the same situation. She said `Lord, your disciples are teaching so many things as Dharma. I'm becoming confused. How can we recognize what is your teaching?' So the Buddha said in effect, `You can recognize it by inner results. You can recognize it by its transforming influence on your own life. Whatever conduces to freedom from conditionings, to passionlessness, to inner peace, to tranquillity, to detachment, to solitude, to awareness, to fewness of desires, to inner illumination, to the higher life in the broadest sense, take that as my teaching.' In other words, the criterion is not external, not logical, not philosophical; it's pragmatic, it's empirical. But the pragmatism is spiritual, the empiricism is, we may say, transcendental empiricism. That's the criterion. So she went away happy. She knew.

If we go further along in the history of Buddhism, if we look at the Japanese tradition, Japanese Buddhist tradition, we'll find that interwoven with it in so many places there is this very beautiful analogue of the finger pointing to the moon. You use the finger to indicate the moon, but you pass from the finger to the moon. You don't mistake the finger for the moon. So in the same way you pass from a religious teaching, from a religious practice, to Enlightenment, to spiritual experience. You don't remain stuck, as it were, with that teaching, with that doctrine, with that practice, with that method, hanging on to it, hugging it, as it were, and think that you've got religion there. No, one sees the moon, and one uses the finger to find the position, the place of the moon in the heavens.

So in all these various ways - in the parable of the raft, in the advice to Mahaprajapati Gotami, in this analogue of the finger and the moon - Buddhism makes it so clear that all its great teachings, its doctrines, its philosophies, its practices, have one aim and one end only, and that is Enlightenment. All are means to that great end.

We might say perhaps that Buddhism takes greater precautions against the possibility of its followers mistaking the finger for the moon than any other teaching, than any other tradition. We don't read, so far as I know, that Christ ever said to his disciples `Be careful that you don't take my words too literally.' We don't read that Mohammed, for instance, ever said to his followers, or ever warned his followers, that when I speak about the delights of heaven and so on, I'm not to be taken too literally, this is just to help you on your way. We don't read that in the case of either Christianity or Islam these warnings were ever given. But certainly in the Buddhist tradition, the Buddhist teaching, and in the Hindu tradition and Hindu teaching also to some extent, this is insisted upon again and again and again. Because human nature is such that we always tend to cling on to that which is the means and treat it as though it was the end itself, especially in matters of religion.

In this respect it's very instructive to notice, as I've pointed out to some of you, that the third of the ten fetters by which we're fettered, bound down to conditioned existence, according to the Buddha's teaching, is what is called silavrata pramarsa. Now this is a Sanskrit expression which simply means - sila is ethics, moral rules; vrata is religious observances; pramarsa is clinging or attachment. So clinging or attachment to ethical rules and religious observances is according to Buddhism a fetter. Not that these observances, not that these practices, are wrong in any way, but that clinging to them constitutes a fetter.

In other words, this represents, we may say, conventional religiosity. Conventional religiosity is a hindrance to Enlightenment. This is a very hard truth for many people to swallow. This is perhaps the main point of Krishnamurti's teaching. I don't personally agree with everything that Krishnamurti says - I think he goes far too far in some directions - but this which he says is certainly valid - that too many people have become bogged down, too many religious people have become bogged down in religion itself. They're treating it not as a means to an end - Enlightenment or any other end - but as an end in itself. There's no need to multiply examples. So far as the religious life of this country is concerned, we can find examples enough all around us, so there's no need to mention any one specifically. We do even find this sometimes, despite all the Buddha's warnings, within Buddhism itself.

Silavrata pramarsa is sometimes translated by the early translators as `no dependence on rites and ceremonies', but really this has nothing to do with rites and ceremonies. As I've said, sila is ethical rules, as in the case of the pancha sila; vrata is religious observance. Let us use all these things by all means. Let us have our pujas; let us have our meditations; let us have our organisational activities, our study of the texts. Let us have all these things. But let us always remember that they are only of use, only of value, to the extent that they lead us in the direction of Enlightenment.

And therefore we have to ask ourselves periodically, as I ask all of you periodically, `Is what I am doing, is what I am studying, is what I am practising, what I am observing, really helping me in the direction of Enlightenment, or am I going mechanically on week after week, month after month, just like a squirrel in a revolving cage? Have I just got into a sort of religious

conditioning? Am I just settling down comfortably in some sort of religious doctrine or practice or group? Or am I using those facilities in such a way that I do get a little nearer to Enlightenment?'

This is the question we have to ask ourselves constantly. It's not enough to declare, well, I'm a Buddhist. It's not enough even to keep up one's daily meditation. The point is, is one getting nearer to Enlightenment? Is one making some progress? Are these things in which one is engaged, which one is studying, which one is practising, functioning as a means of helping one towards the end in the direction of which they point?

Now in this connection there's a rather interesting of what we may call interpretation which arises. We've spoken of the Buddha's experience of Enlightenment as constituting the nature, the essence, of Buddhism. We've spoken of the Buddha communicating or trying to communicate that experience of his to others, so that they also might have that experience for themselves. And we've spoken of Buddhism as essentially this communication.

But we have also to take note of the fact, of the point, that in communicating his experience, his spiritual experience, his transcendental experience, whatever we may like to call it, the Buddha had perforce to make use of contemporary language. This is something we don't always appreciate, or don't always appreciate very clearly or very definitely. Of course, he had to use, we all know, a contemporary Indian language. It wasn't Pali; it was probably Magadhi or Kosali or something of that sort. No doubt he spoke several languages or dialects. But it isn't that merely that one means. He had to express himself, he had to communicate what he had to communicate, his experience of Enlightenment, in terms of contemporary language not just in the linguistic sense, philological sense, but also in the sense of ideas.

And this brings us to another very interesting and very important question of interpretation. Some scholars, some historical scholars, dealing with Buddhism, sometimes make the statement that the Buddha borrowed such and such an idea from his predecessors. For instance, you can open some little popular books on Buddhism and they'll tell you almost on the first page that the Buddha borrowed the idea of karma and rebirth from existing religious traditions. Sometimes of course they'll also tell you that it didn't fit in very well with his own discoveries, but that's neither here nor there.

But this sort of way of looking at things, one might say, is extremely crude and extremely superficial. The Buddha's purpose, the Buddha's aim, was to make himself understood. So when you speak to people you have to use their language, not just in the linguistic sense, but the language of ideas which is familiar to them. So when the Buddha spoke to people in India, northeastern India mainly, 500 BC, though his experience was beyond words, beyond thought even, though it was something in a sense incommunicable, when he wanted to communicate something of it, to suggest it, to convey some hint of it at least, he had not only to use the language in the literal sense of his day, or languages, but also the language of ideas which was understood by the people to whom he was speaking. Of course, he used that language, that language of ideas, in his own way, and no doubt in using it, modified it, sometimes entirely reinterpreted it.

To give just a couple of very simple sociological examples, he reinterpreted the word brahmana. Brahmana in the Buddha's day usually meant just a priest, a hereditary priest. But the Buddha reinterpreted this word and made it stand for a very high spiritual idea. In the same way vasala. Vasala means an outcast, in the literal sense. But the Buddha used it in the sense of an unworthy person, a spiritually degenerate person. And in this way he transformed the meaning of many of the terms which he used.

Now this brings us directly to a very important question of great significance not only for Buddhism but for other religions too, and this is the whole question of the relationship between what we may call the founded and what we may call the ethnic religions. A founded religion is a religion which has a definite individual founder. We can say that Christianity was founded by Christ, we can say that Mohammedanism or Islam was founded by Mohammed,

and we can say that Buddhism was founded by the Buddha: just one individual figure to whom the whole tradition can be quite decisively and definitely traced back, so that you can say that had there been no Christ, there would have been no Christianity; no Mohammed, no Islam; no Buddha, no Buddhism.

So these are the founded religions, sometimes called the missionary religions. But you've also got what are called the ethnic religions, religions which have grown up among people; there's no single founder. They seem to have grown up, as it were, as the product of the whole people, the whole race, the whole group, like Judaism. Moses was a very prominent figure in the history of Judaism, but you can't say that Moses founded Judaism. In the same way, Sri Krishna, Brahma, they're very prominent in the history of Hinduism, but no Hindu says that Brahma and Krishna founded Hinduism. So in the same way with other ethnic religions, like those of Japan. Shinto: Shinto has got no founder, it just grew up on the soil of Japan.

So we have these two groups. We've got the founded religions, the missionary religions, and the ethnic religions. Now the ethnic religions are chronologically prior to the founded religions, and we find that every founded religion arises within the matrix, as it were, of an ethnic religion. You never get a missionary religion appearing out of the blue, as it were. You never get a founded religion appearing out of the blue, as it were - always within the matrix of an ethnic religion. So in this way Christianity arises within the matrix of Judaism. Islam arises within the matrix of Arabian polytheism. And Buddhism in the same way arises within the matrix of what is popularly known as Hinduism.

Now at first each missionary religion, each founded religion, or rather the Buddha or Christ or Mohammed, speaks the language of the ethnic religion in the midst of which he finds himself, speaks it in the full sense not just philologically, but speaks also its language of ideas, uses its terms, its concepts, its symbols, and even its myths. He has no alternative, just as if we are born and brought up in England we have no alternative but to speak the English language, we are surrounded by it. So in the same way if a spiritual genius like the Buddha is born, spiritually born, in a context of Hinduism, it's got no alternative but to speak the language of Hinduism. In the same way, Christ had no alternative but to speak the language of Judaism. And thus they all do that.

But, however, they speak it with a difference, just as someone like Shakespeare comes along, in the history of English literature. He uses the same old English language, the same language that we use, but look at the use he makes of it. He expresses his own genius, his own insight, his own understanding, his own imagination. In the same way, the Buddha comes along, or Christ comes along - they use the ethnic language - the language of ideas, myth, symbol and so on - but they use it in their own way, they modify it, even sometimes they give it a little twist, even sometimes in the very opposite direction from what it customarily has.

So we see that there's a close relationship in this way between ethnic religion and missionary religion, missionary religion and ethnic religion. And this is what I call the symbiosis of religions. I have used this word symbiosis in the past in a different context, in a very uncomplimentary way, but today I'm using it in a rather different sense. The symbiosis of religions means a sort of mutual dependence, in a sense a sort of living interdependence of the ethnic and the missionary religions.

And I would say that Buddhism and Hinduism are a very good example of this. We find, as I have said, that the Buddha speaks - with modifications - the language of Hinduism largely, simply because there was no other language available if he wanted to communicate with people at all. Now an interesting thing we find is that when a great spiritual genius, the founder of a new religion, speaks the old ethnic language - the language of ideas, myths, symbols - the whole ethnic religion itself becomes refined, just as when Shakespeare uses the English language, the English language is modified, even refined, because of the power of expression he brings to it as a result of his own individual poetic genius. So in the same way, when the Buddha uses the language of Hinduism, Hinduism becomes refined. This is a historical fact. When Christ uses the language of Judaism, he refines it at the same time.

So what very often happens is that the two become - the ethnic and the missionary religion become - to some extent indistinguishable. If you read some of the later rabbinical writings, after Judaism had absorbed some influence from Christianity, you see there's very little difference, Christian theology apart, between the teaching of Christ and thos rabbinical teachings. In the same way, if you look at Hinduism, especially in its form of the Vedanta, after Hinduism has had much contact with Buddhism, when Buddhism has used the language of Hinduism, Hinduism has used also the language of Buddhism, the two become almost indistinguishable. So if you take a great teacher like `Goldapada'?, the teacher's teacher of Shankaracarya, one finds it's very near to Buddhism indeed, as near, probably, as Hinduism comes, near especially to the Madhyamika.

And this I feel is one of the reasons for the so-called disappearance of Buddhism from India. This is a question which historians are very fond of posing. How was it that Buddhism, after one thousand five hundreds years in India, disappeared? Well, it didn't really disappear. Much of it had been absorbed. Buddhism used the language of Hinduism, Hinduism absorbed some of the ideas of Buddhism, and in that way they became closer and closer. And after the invading Islamic hordes had destroyed the Buddhist monasteries, popular Buddhism was indistinguishable from popular Hinduism, and they just merged. There were other factors of course involved, but this is a very important one.

Now that's perhaps enough about the nature of Buddhism. The nature of Buddhism, the essence of Buddhism, consists in the Buddha's Enlightenment. Now let us say something about the development of Buddhism. In a sense there's no question of the development of Buddhism, no question of the development of its intrinsic essence, its very nature. There's no evolution in Enlightenment; that remains constant, that remains the same all the way through. But there is a development, even an evolution we may say, in the medium of expression. Usually Buddhism is divided into two great schools: Theravada and Mahayana. So far as I can see this is very unsatisfactory. I would say it's like dividing the animal kingdom into ginger cats and invertebrates. It's a very unscientific classification. So being dissatisfied with the existing classifications, I've worked out what I may describe as my own phenomenology of Buddhism. I've dealt with it in detail in a current book which I haven't quite finished yet, but I'll give you a sort of rough outline of it. I gave this outline some months ago at Glasgow University, and they were quite staggered because it upsets all the textbooks.

Buddhism existed in India for one thousand five hundred years, roughly from 500 BC to 1000 AD. Now, there are three great stages, or three great periods of development, each lasting for about five hundred years. These three great periods are known in Buddhist literature by the terms Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana. Now lots of people take these three terms to signify three different schools, rather as though one should speak in a Christian context of the Baptists and the Congregationalists and the Roman Catholics, but it's not like that at all. Not schools, but stages of development.

The word Hinayana literally means the lesser vehicle; Mahayana means the great vehicle; Vajrayana means the diamond or adamantine vehicle. This doesn't concern us very much. Theravada means the school of the elders, and it's one of the eighteen subdivisions of the Hinayana. So during the first five hundred years of the existence or the development of Buddhism in India, we have the Hinayana dominant; during the second five hundred years the Mahayana dominant; and during the third five hundred years the Vajrayana dominant. Now one may say that the Hinayana, the Mahayana, the Vajrayana, represent at each stage the acquisition by Buddhism of what we may describe as a new religio-cultural language. The essence, Enlightenment, remains the same; but civilization, culture, these go on developing. And a mode of expression which might have been quite suitable in the Buddha's day may be quite unsuitable five hundred or a thousand years later. So one might say that the type of language used by the Buddha, the type of myth he refers to and so on in the course of his teaching, is Vedic. But after the time of the Buddha Hinduism itself, Indian culture, passed through many different stages of development, and Buddhism had to keep pace, as it were.

So during the first five hundred years, in the form or stage of development we call the

Hinayana, we find Buddhism speaking the type of language which was most understood, best understood in those days, which I have called ethico-psychological. This type of Buddhism speaks mainly in terms of ethics, of moral life, and psychological analysis, understanding the mind, its various states, the way in which those states combine and dissolve and recombine. So this sort of approach led eventually to the rise of the Abhidharma, which classifies all the different mental states and concomitants in a very complex way indeed. Just to give you an idea, mental states, citta, are classified into 89 different types, and caitasikas, mental concomitants, according to Theravada tradition, into 52. So you get a quite complex sort of psychology building up.

So during this period, the first five hundred years of its existence in India, Buddhism spoke an ethico-psychological language. Now times changed. People became interested in different things. So the Mahayana, or what we call the Mahayana, arose. Here Buddhism speaks a language which we may describe as devotional-metaphysical. One gets a very strong, very rich development of devotional Buddhism, because of Bodhisattvas coming into view - devotion to them, worship of them, occupies a very prominent part in religious life - and there's also very deep philosophical investigation. It's at this time that one has Nagarjuna and Asanga and so on. So in this stage, the second five hundred years of its existence in India, the language spoken by Buddhism, the language which it speaks to people to lead them to Enlightenment, is predominantly the language of devotion, the language of philosophy, of metaphysics. Then in the third period, the third five hundred years, Buddhism learned yet another language, acquired yet another language, the language of the Tantras, the language of the Vajrayana. It speaks in terms of esoteric yoga, it speaks in terms of esoteric ritual, symbolism, universal correspondence and so on.

So in this way, though the Enlightenment experience remains constant, Buddhism speaks one language after another according to the religious and cultural developments in India during those fifteen hundred years. Now these languages are not mutually exclusive. Comparisons shouldn't be taken too far, they shouldn't be taken too literally. When Buddhism started speaking in devotional-metaphysical language, it didn't forget the ethical-psychological language; and when it started speaking the yogic-ritualistic language it didn't leave aside the devotional-metaphysical language. So one finds in the history of Buddhism a process going on of what one may describe as gradual incrementation, Buddhism becoming richer and richer, its whole language, in fact, its whole mode of communication, becoming more and more subtle, more and more wide-ranging, capable of appealing to more and more people.

So this was the position in India, Buddhism passing through what are usually called the three great stages of its development, though we must remember, as I have said, not a development in its essence, Enlightenment, but a development as regards the language spoken, the terms in which it addresses people, the terms of their own life, their own understanding.

Now at present in the Buddhist world, we may say, geographically speaking, there are three major forms of Buddhism. First of all there's southeast Asian Buddhism, which we find in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand and Laos, based canonically on the Pali Canon, the scriptures in Pali. Then there's Chinese Buddhism, which includes Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese Buddhism, based on the Chinese scriptures, which are translated mainly from the Sanskrit texts - the Sanskrit texts have mostly been lost, but we have these Chinese translations. Then the third major form of Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, including Mongolian Buddhism and Himalayan Buddhism, based firmly on the Kangyur and the Tangyur, the Tibetan versions of the Sanskrit, or mainly the Sanskrit, scriptures. So southeast Asian Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism.

Now the differences between these different forms of Buddhism have often puzzled scholars and students. If you go to Ceylon or Burma you will see what appears to be one kind of Buddhism, one type of Buddhism. You go to Japan or China, and you see something which seems quite different, go to Tibet, you see something which seems quite different again. Now what is the reason for this? What is the explanation? To some extent we may say that southeast Asian Buddhism differs from say Chinese Buddhism because southeast Asian

Buddhism is southeast Asian and Chinese Buddhism is Chinese; there's a cultural difference, a local difference. But that isn't the whole story by any means. To understand more deeply we have to go back into the history of Buddhism.

And if we go back we find that Ceylon was proselytized - that is to say, Buddhism went from India to Ceylon - during about the middle of the first period. In other words, Buddhism went to Ceylon when it was speaking the language of ethics and psychology. So in Ceylon Buddhism has been speaking that language ever since. Now Buddhism went to China about the middle of the second period, or a little earlier, maybe, when it was speaking not only the language of ethics and psychology, but the language of devotion and of metaphysics too. So Chinese Buddhism still speaks those languages. And Buddhism went to Tibet in the middle of the third period, when it was speaking not only the language of ethics and psychology and devotion and metaphysics, but also esoteric yoga and ritual. So Tibetan Buddhism, therefore, is the richest of all.

So we may say, again generalising or recapitulating, that the Buddhism of southeast Asia represents the Buddhism of India of the first period, the Hinayana. The Buddhism of China represents the Buddhism of India of the second period, that is Hinayana plus Mahayana. And the Buddhism of Tibet represents Indian Buddhism of the third period, that is to say Hinayana plus Mahayana plus Vajrayana. Subdivisions are possible, but we won't go into that; the outline is sufficiently clear for general purposes.

So if we see Buddhism in this way it begins to make sense. The differences no longer confuse us. We no longer think Zen is contradictory to Theravada; it's a difference of language. The Enlightenment behind, the meaning which is sought to be conveyed in these different ways, is the same.

Now I've described the Mahayana as devotional-metaphysical. It's devotional, as I've said, because it attaches great importance to what we cannot help calling in English, though it's incorrect, the worship of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas: Avalokitesvara, representing the aspect of compassion, Manjusri, representing the aspect of wisdom, and so on. But in what sense do we speak of the Mahayana as metaphysical? There's so such as speculative metaphysics in Buddhism. According to Buddhism reason is powerless to apprehend reality. Reality can be apprehended in the depths of our own spiritual experience. But there are what we call conceptual formulations. These conceptual formulations are for the benefit of communication - not that they really represent the ultimate spiritual reality, but that when communicated and understood intellectually, especially on the basis of meditation, they can as it were spark off not just an intellectual understanding, not anything discursive, but a direct insight into what they represent or what they symbolize.

Now in a very interesting passage in the scriptures the Buddha says that he has no drsti, no ditthi. It means literally view. It roughly corresonds to philosophy or metaphysics. The six systems of Indian philosophy - that's Hindu philosophy - are of course the six darshanas. Darshana means a seeing, a perspective if you like, on reality. So ditthi has the same sort of meaning: it's a view from a particular angle, a particular direction. It's obviously limited.

So the Buddha says, and he says it very clearly, very emphatically, `I have no drsti. I have no philosophy. I have no metaphysics. I have nothing to say about reality.' - so in a sense also nothing to teach. I think this is one of the most important aspects of Buddhism: that Buddhism has nothing to teach. This is why the Buddha is said to have remained silent all his life - not to be taken literally of course, because as far as the scriptures are concerned he was always talking, always teaching. But although he was always teaching, at the same time he had nothing to teach. So what does this all mean? - the Buddha has no drsti, no view, no metaphysics. It really means, in a way, that there's no such thing as Buddhism. There's a language, but really there's nothing to communicate - because what you're trying to communicate in a sense is beyond communication, and you communicate only to try to make the other person realize that what you're trying to communicate is beyond communication. When he sees that, then he can get it, and then you really have communicated.

But this isn't very easy for people to grasp. They usually like to think that they've got Buddhism here, that they've got it in this book, that Professor so and so has put it all down there, they've got it; or that they've got it in a little list of important teachings or principles, it's all there; or that they've got it in a certain tradition or a certain practice. They like to think that they've got it. So when they think that they've got it, of course they cling on to it. But the Buddha's hands are empty; he hasn't got anything, not even Buddhism. This is of course just another way of putting what one was speaking about before, that is, that Buddhism is only a means to an end. Buddhism is just Enlightenment itself, incommunicable Enlightenment.

So in Buddhism, therefore, no metaphysics, no philosophy in a strict sense. We've got what appear to philosophical systems, what appear to be metaphysics, in the Mahayana, but not quite in the Western sense. Perhaps I shouldn't say in the Western sense, because Plato in his seventh epistle says something very much like this. He says that it's not that I've got anything to teach. So students of the Platonic dialogues are rather concerned that Plato contradicts himself; that's what they say. They have the idea that Plato ought to be teaching a consistent dogmatic system, but they don't find that. And in his seventh epistle Plato plainly says that he hasn't got a consistent dogmatic system. He's only trying to strike a spark so that the disciple will see things for himself.

So it's the same with Buddhism. It's no use thinking that well, when one has got the teaching about karma and rebirth, then the teachings about the three characteristics of all existence, then the teaching about sunyata, and then all the techniques of meditation, then one has got Buddhism - not at all. One has learned the language of Buddhism, but one hasn't started speaking it. One sometimes remains dumb all one's life and never speaks. One thinks that what is really language is the content of the language, that what one thinks of as content of the language is in fact part of the language itself. That's the mistake which most people make about Buddhism. In other words, they catch hold of the outer shell, but they miss the kernel. They're clinging hold of the finger and missing the moon. So that's what we all do all the time, so we need from time to time to be reminded about it.

Now the fact that in the Mahayana there are metaphysics which in a sense aren't metaphysics, and philosophy which isn't a philosophy, is not unconnected with the fact that Buddhism is a non-theistic religion. Theistic religions, those which believe in a personal God, lay down God, the creator, as their first principle as it were, and they work downwards from that. But Buddhism doesn't. Buddhism doesn't say a word about God, except perhaps to discard the idea. People will of course sometimes ask you, `Well, if there's no God, how did everything come into existence?' But Buddhism replies that even this idea of things coming into existence at all, this idea of origination, of production, is part of our own mental functioning, our own mental structure, if you like. When one goes beyond that functioning, beyond that particular kind of structure, which happens when one gains any deep spiritual experience, then the question of origination just doesn't arise at all.

Subject and object, one may say, in Buddhism are mutually determining, complementary. When you go beyond the individual mind, the subjective mind, the thinking mind, there's no object either, so there's no question as to how it ultimately arose, even the whole universe itself. But when the universe is there, and your thinking mind is also there, well, you can go back and back and back and back, but you never reach a first point, because however far back you go, your own mind is there going back; and so long as your mind is still there, its object correlative is still there too. So you go beyond the world, as the Buddha said in many places, only by going beyond the mind. In a sense, the origination and the cessation of the world, the universe, is in one's own mind.

Now some people of course wouldn't describe this as religion or religious. They'd say there's no God, well there's no religion either. But that's been rather exploded lately, and one finds, as I've mentioned frequently, even Christian circles nowadays developing an idea of non-theistic religion. Buddhism has been a non-theistic religion for two thousand five hundred years. I won't say it's part of its essence, but it's certainly part of the language which Buddhism has spoken from the very beginning of its history.

Now our hour is nearly up, and I have a feeling that I might have wandered just a little from the main topic, but I hope I haven't wandered too far. We've taken, or tried to take, a sort of bird's eye view of Buddhism. We've seen that Buddhism starts with, originates from and goes back to what we call Enlightenment, supreme spiritual Enlightenment, or sambodhi. And all the various teachings of the Buddha, whether doctrinal teachings or teachings of any other kind, are simply hints, as it were, as to how that experience is to be recreated within ourselves. These teachings, whether doctrines or practices, are not ends in themselves.

Buddhism, we've also learned, speaks many languages. It learned to speak first of all the language of ethics and psychology. Then it learned the language of devotion and metaphysics; then finally of esoteric yoga and ritual, though all these languages have the same meaning, they all communicate the same transcendental fact, they all point in the same direction. So we shouldn't be confused when we encounter school upon school, and sect upon sect. Much less still should we grasp hold of any one of them, or any part of any one of them, and say, `This is Buddhism.' Much less still should we think that we understand Buddhism, because as I've said, in the very deepest sense, there is a sense in which there is no such thing as Buddhism. When we understand that, not just historically but spiritually, even transcendentally, when we understand that there really is no such thing as Buddhism, then we really do understand Buddhism.