

Lecture 10: Stream Entry - Edited Version

Going for Refuge may seem radical enough, involving as it does a total reorientation of our lives towards the spiritual values symbolized by the Three Jewels. This, however, is by no means all that is implied by conversion in Buddhism; indeed, it is only the beginning. We may start off by Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels, but in the end we must ourselves become the Three Jewels. There must be a permanent shift of the centre of gravity of our being from the conditioned to the Unconditioned, from samsara to nirvana. That is to say, conversion in Buddhism means not just a turning around to Buddhism, which happens when we go for Refuge to the Three Jewels, but a turning around within the context of our Buddhist practice itself.

I have chosen here to describe this essential shift in terms of gravity, but this particular point in one's spiritual career seems to lend itself to all kinds of metaphors. One of the most traditional, for example, is 'Stream Entry'. The 'stream' is the current which flows to Enlightenment, and the point of Stream Entry is the stage of spiritual practice at which your momentum towards Enlightenment is so strong that no obstacle can hinder your progress. Until this point, spiritual life is bound to be a struggle - you are going 'against the flow' of your own mundane nature - but when you enter the stream, all the struggling is over.

In this chapter, we shall be looking more closely at the crucial experience expressed by metaphors such as 'Stream Entry', a 'shift in gravity', and several more. But first we will focus on another aspect of conversion, one which comes earlier in the spiritual life, and which in fact corresponds to Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. This experience can also be described in terms of a metaphor: the metaphor of the Wheel and the Spiral. And to understand the metaphor of the Wheel and the Spiral, to get just a glimmer of what it means, we have to go back two-thousand-five-hundred years to the foot of the Bodhi tree, back to the night of the Buddha's realization of supreme and perfect Enlightenment.

What was attained on that night, only a Buddha can say - indeed, not even a Buddha can really describe it. The Lankavatara Sutra goes so far as to say that from the night of his Enlightenment to the night of his final passing away, the Buddha uttered not one word. In other words, the secret of his Enlightenment, the nature of the great transforming experience which he underwent, is incommunicable, and that is all that we can really say about it. We cannot say that it is this, or it is that, or even that it is not this or not that, because that would be to limit it. Nor can we say that it is this and that. According to the Buddha himself, we cannot even say that it is neither this nor that. All ways of speaking, all ways of telling, are transcended.

The Enlightenment experience is inexpressible, but we can get some hint of what it is by taking a more indirect view of it - by looking at it in terms of the difference which that experience made to the Buddha's outlook on existence as a whole. The scriptures tell us that when the Buddha surveyed the universe in the light of his supreme spiritual experience, he saw one prevailing principle or truth at work. He saw that the whole vast range and sweep of existence, from the lowest to the highest, in all its depth and breadth, was subject to what he subsequently called the law of conditionality. He saw that whatever arises anywhere in the universe, from the grossest material level up to the most subtle spiritual level, arises in dependence on conditions, and that when those conditions cease, the arisen phenomena also cease. He further saw that there are no exceptions to this principle. All things whatsoever within the sphere of phenomenal existence, from tiny cells to empires and great galactic systems, even feelings and thoughts, are governed by this law of conditionality. Expressed in conceptual terms, this great truth or law of 'conditioned co-production' (pratitya-samutpada in Sanskrit) became the basis of Buddhist thought.

There is a lot that could be said about conditionality, but there is one point in particular which we must understand, not only to enable us to grasp Buddhist thought but, even more importantly, to enable us to practise Buddhism effectively. This crucial fact is that conditionality is of two kinds: the 'cyclical' and the 'progressive' or 'spiral'.

In the cyclical mode of conditionality, there is a process of action and reaction between pairs of opposites: pleasure and pain, virtue and vice, birth and death and rebirth. What usually happens is that we swing back and forth between these pairs of opposites. We experience pleasure, for example, but sooner or later the pleasure goes and we experience pain; then, after some time, the pain swings back again into pleasure. In the spiral mode of conditionality, on the other hand, the succeeding factor increases the effect of the preceding one rather than negating it. When you are experiencing pleasure, instead of reacting in the cyclical order - with pain - you go from pleasure to happiness, and then from happiness to joy, from joy to rapture, and so on. The cyclical mode of conditionality, in which you go round and round, governs the samsara, the round of conditioned existence, but the spiral mode, in which you go up and up, governs the

spiritual life, especially as embodied in the path or way laid down by the Buddha, and the goal of that path, Enlightenment.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the round of conditioned or mundane existence is commonly represented in pictorial form. If you walked into a Tibetan temple or monastery you would see on the right-hand side of the entrance, inside the vestibule, an enormous painting of the Wheel of Life. In the hub of the Wheel, you would see three animals: a pig, a cock, and a snake, each biting the tail of the one in front. These symbolize the three basic human passions. The pig represents ignorance, in the sense of basic spiritual confusion, lack of an appreciation of spiritual values, and mental bewilderment of the deepest and darkest kind; the snake stands for anger, aversion, or irritation; and the cock symbolizes desire, craving, and lust in all their forms. These three animals are at the centre of the Wheel to indicate that it is our basic spiritual ignorance, together with the craving and aversion connected with it, that keeps us within the round of existence, undergoing birth and death and rebirth. The animals are depicted biting each other's tails because ignorance, craving, and hatred are all interconnected. If you have one, then you will have the other two. They cannot be separated, being different manifestations of the same primordial alienation from Reality.

Round the hub of the Wheel of Life you would see another circle, divided into two segments, one side black and the other white. In the white half there are people moving upwards, happy and smiling; in the black half people are tumbling down in a very wretched and terrible condition. The white side represents the path of virtue; the dark one the path of vice. So this circle represents, on one hand, the possibility of attaining to higher states within the round of existence, and on the other, the possibility of sinking to lower ones. The white and black paths do not refer to spiritual progress - or lack of it - towards the Unconditioned, but only to higher or lower levels of being (determined by ethical or unethical actions) within conditioned existence itself.

Moving outwards from the hub, the third circle - which takes up the most space in the Wheel - is divided into six segments, each vividly depicting one of the spheres of sentient conditioned existence. At the top we see the world of the gods; next to that, working clockwise, the world of the asuras or anti-gods; then the world of the hungry ghosts; then the lower realm of torment and suffering; above that, on the other side, that of the animals; and then the human world. These are the six spheres of sentient existence within which we may be reborn, according to whether the deeds we have performed and the thoughts we have entertained have been predominantly ethical or unethical.

So the meaning of the Wheel, as far as these three circles are concerned, is that sentient beings - and that means us - dominated by greed, anger, and ignorance, perform either skilful or unskilful actions and are reborn accordingly in an appropriate realm of conditioned existence. But there is also a fourth circle, right on the rim, divided into twelve segments; this represents the twelve nidanas or links of the chain of conditioned co-production, the chain which explains in detail how the whole process of life comes about. In the Wheel of Life's depiction of this chain, each segment contains an illustration of a particular nidana, and these illustrations proceed clockwise round the Wheel.

At the top we see a blind man with a stick, an illustration of avidya, which means ignorance in the spiritual sense of ignorance of the truth, ignorance of Reality. Next comes a potter with a wheel and pots, representing the samskaras or karma formations - volitional activities which issue from that ignorance. In other words, because of our primordial spiritual ignorance, and the things we have done in previous existences based on that ignorance, we have been reborn into our present life. Together, these two links make up what is called the 'cause process' of the past life, due to which we have arisen in this new existence.

The third image is a monkey climbing a flowering tree. This represents vijñana, consciousness, which here means the first moment - almost, we might say, the first throb - of consciousness of the new being (or more accurately, the neither old nor new being) which arises in the womb of the mother at the time of conception. Fourth, arising in dependence on that, there is nama-rupa, the whole psychophysical organism (the image for this is a boat with four passengers, one of them steering). In dependence upon that arises shadayatana, the six sense organs (in Buddhism, the mind is counted as a sixth sense) symbolized by a house with five windows and a door. Then, as the six sense organs come into contact with the external world, sparsa, touch or sensation, arises; the Wheel of Life's image for this is a man and woman embracing. And in dependence upon touch arises vedana or feeling (pleasant, painful, or neutral), represented by a man with an arrow in his eye. This group of five nidanas together makes up the 'effect process' of the present life; they are the effects of actions based on ignorance performed in the previous life.

Next, there is a picture of a woman offering a drink to a man. This stands for the link of trishna or thirst - craving or desire in the widest sense. Then comes upadana, clinging or attachment, represented by a man gathering fruit from a tree; then bhava or becoming, the image for which is a pregnant woman. These three constitute the 'cause process' of the present life, because they set up actions which must bear fruit in the future, either in this life or in some future existence. Lastly jati or birth and then jara-marana, old age and death, bring us full circle and constitute the 'effect process' of the future life. These last two cast imagery aside; the pictures simply show the truth in its starkness - a woman giving birth and a corpse being carried to the cremation ground.

So what does all this signify? It is a graphic illustration of the whole of human life. Due to our ignorance, and activities based on that ignorance, the seed of consciousness arises again in a new existence, which develops into a new psychophysical organism endowed with six senses. This inevitably comes into contact with the corresponding six sense-objects, as a result of which feelings and sensations arise. We start craving for the pleasant feelings and rejecting the unpleasant ones, while we remain indifferent to the neutral ones - and we therefore start clinging to what is pleasant and avoiding what is unpleasant. Habitually reacting in this way, grasping at pleasure and shrinking from pain, we eventually precipitate ourselves into another life, a life which is again subject to old age, disease, and death.

In this way, the twelve links explain how the whole process of life comes about. For explanatory purposes they are spread over three lives (past, present, and future), and in particular they show the alternation of cause and effect. First you get the cause process of the previous life; second, the effect process of the present life; third, the cause process of the present life; and fourth, the effect process of the future life. In this way there is an alternation between the two processes, cause and effect, a cyclical movement between pairs of opposites. This is all getting rather complicated, but it is leading us to a crucial point. Within the context of the three lives there are three points, known as the three sandhis or junctures, at which the cause process changes into the effect process or vice versa. Sandhi is an evocative term, being the Pali and Sanskrit word for dawn and twilight, the time when night passes over into day, or day into night.

The first sandhi occurs at the point where the volitional activities, the last link in the cause process of the past life, are followed by the arising of consciousness in the womb, the first link of the effect process of the present life. Another sandhi occurs at the juncture where in dependence upon feeling, the last link in the effect process of the present life, arises craving, the first link in the cause process of the present life. And the third juncture is where becoming, the last link in the cause process of the present life, gives rise to birth, the first link in the effect process of the future life.

The first and third of these sandhis are 'non-volitional' - that is, effect follows cause without our being able to do anything about it. But the second sandhi, between feeling and craving, is of crucial importance for us because it is a juncture at which we can make a choice. In fact, it is the point of intersection between the two kinds of conditionality, the cyclical and the progressive. This is where we either make a mess of things and as a result revolve once again in the Wheel, or start to progress and enter the Spiral. So we need to understand exactly what happens at this point.

All the time, whatever we are doing, even when we are just sitting reading a book, various sensations are impinging upon us - sensations of cold, heat, sound, light, and so on. All these sensations, whether we are aware of them or not, are either pleasant, painful, or neutral. Now, as these feelings arise, how do we react? To pleasant sensations we react most of the time with craving. We want them to continue, we don't want to lose them, so we try to cling on to them. Our natural tendency is to try to repeat pleasant experiences. This is the fatal mistake we are only too apt to make. We are not content to let the experience come and go; we want to perpetuate it, and so we react with craving. If, on the other hand, the sensation is unpleasant, painful, or at least unsatisfactory, we instinctively, even compulsively, try to thrust it away from us. We don't want it. We don't want anything to do with it. We try to escape from it. In short, we react with aversion. And if we feel a sensation which is neither pleasant nor painful, we just remain confused. Not knowing whether to grasp it or reject it, we react with bewilderment.

This is how we react all the time to the sensations and experiences that are continually impinging upon our consciousness through all the senses, including the mind. In this way an effect process is followed by a cause process, and we circle once more in the round of existence. The Wheel of Life makes one more revolution, and all the conditions are created or recreated for a fresh rebirth. This is where it all happens, at the point where in dependence upon feeling there arises craving.

But suppose we do not react in this way. Suppose, when sensations and feelings befall us, we do not react with craving or aversion or confusion. Suppose we can stop the process, suppose we can stop the Wheel turning - then what happens? Quite simply, what happens then is that mundane, conditioned existence

comes to an end, and only the transcendental is left. We attain Enlightenment, nirvana, or whatever else we like to call it.

The next question is how to stop the process. It is easy to say, but how do we do it? Broadly speaking, there are two ways of ensuring that feeling is not succeeded by craving, two ways of ensuring that the Wheel does not make another revolution. The first is a sudden way which shatters the Wheel at a single blow; the second is a gradual way which progressively slows the Wheel down, gently applying a brake to bring the whole thing slowly to a halt.

The sudden way may sound rather Zen-like, Zen being famous for its abrupt methods, but we can illustrate it with a story not from the Zen tradition but from the Udana of the Pali Canon: the story of Bahiya. <§The Udana - Inspired Utterances of the Buddha, 1.10, trans. John D. Ireland, Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka 1990.> Bahiya was a monk who had been admitted to the order in some distant part of the country, which meant that he had never had the chance to meet the Buddha or ask him any questions. He wanted to put this right as soon as possible, so he made the long journey to the place where the Buddha was staying. When he arrived, however, the Buddha was out on his daily alms round, going from house to house for food. Having come so far, Bahiya wasn't going to hang around waiting for the Buddha to come back, so he asked someone which direction the Buddha had taken and eagerly went after him.

It wasn't long before he caught up with the Buddha, still walking mindfully from door to door. Bahiya had no thought of waiting for a suitable moment to speak with his teacher for the first time. Almost treading on the Buddha's heels, he called out, no doubt rather breathlessly, 'Please give me a teaching.' But it was the Buddha's custom never to speak during his alms round, so he ignored Bahiya's request and kept on walking. A second time Bahiya asked, even more urgently this time, 'Please give me a teaching.' But again the Buddha ignored him and kept walking. Refusing to give up, Bahiya made his request for a third time. And this time he got a response. It was apparently a rule with the Buddha that if anyone asked him something three times, he would answer the question, whatever it was and however serious the consequences might be for the questioner. So, stopping in his tracks, he turned round, gave Bahiya a very direct look, and said, 'In the seen, only the seen. In the heard, only the heard. In the touched, only the touched. In the tasted, only the tasted. In the smelt, only the smelt. In the thought, only the thought.' He then turned round and went on with his alms round - and Bahiya became Enlightened on the spot.

The Buddha was saying, in effect, 'Don't react.' If a sound impinges on your eardrums, it's just a sound - you don't have to react to it. You don't have to like it or dislike it. You don't have to want it to continue or want it to stop. 'In the heard, only the heard.' The same goes for the seen, the touched, the tasted, the smelt, and even the thought. Don't react. Let the bare experience be there, but don't make that experience the basis for any action or reaction in the cyclical order. If you can do that, you abruptly stop the Wheel revolving and realize nirvana here and now, on the spot - as Bahiya, it seems, actually did.

The sudden way is obviously very, very difficult. In fact, it may even sound impossible. The example of Bahiya, and many similar cases, shows that it is possible, but for most people it is a much more reliable and sound procedure to try to follow not this sudden path but the gradual path (which of course does not mean the 'never-never path'!). The gradual path can be laid out in terms of the Noble Eightfold Path, the seven stages of purification, the ten bhūmis, and many other formulations, but in this context it is perhaps best explained in terms of the twelve positive links which constitute, psychologically and spiritually, the successive stages of the progressive movement of conditionality as it spirals away from the Wheel. For our present purposes we shall ignore the last four of these, as they take us beyond Stream Entry. <§The twelve links of the Spiral Path are described in detail in Sangharakshita, The Three Jewels, Windhorse, Glasgow 1991, chap.13.> Here we shall be concerned only with the first eight links, and particularly with the first and second and with the seventh and eighth.

The first and second links leading up and away from the cyclical mode of action and reaction are dukkha, suffering or unsatisfactoriness, and sraḍḍha, faith or confidence. In the twelve links of the Wheel of Life, suffering corresponds to feeling, the last link in the effect process of the present life, and faith corresponds to craving, the first link in the cause process of the present life. What this means is that when sensations and experiences impinge upon us we do not have to react with craving and thus perpetuate the cyclical movement of existence. We can react instead in a positive way. As we experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings, we can begin to see, to feel, that none of them are really very satisfactory, not even the pleasant ones. Even they are not enough. Even if we could perpetuate pleasant experiences and eliminate painful ones, there would still be some hidden lack, something unsatisfied and frustrated. So we begin to see, we begin to feel, we begin to realize, that this whole conditioned existence - our life, our

ordinary experience - is not enough. It cannot give us permanent, true satisfaction or happiness. If we analyse it deeply, in the long run it is unsatisfactory.

As we start to see that this is so, we begin to sit loose to mundane existence. We begin to detach ourselves from it. We don't care about it so much. We start thinking that there must be something higher, something beyond, something which can give satisfaction of a more permanent, deeper, and truer nature - in a word, something spiritual, even something transcendental. So we begin to shift the focus of our interest, and eventually we develop faith. We 'place the heart' less and less on our everyday experience, and more and more on the Unconditioned, the transcendental. At first our faith may be confused, vague, and inchoate, but gradually it clears, it settles down, it strengthens, and eventually it becomes faith or confidence in the Three Jewels. We begin to see the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha as the embodiments of those higher spiritual values which both stand above and beyond the world yet at the same time give meaning and significance to the world. We place our heart more and more on them, and when that faith waxes strong enough we are galvanized into action and we go for Refuge.

In this way, faith is the positive, spiritual counterpart of craving. Instead of craving arising in dependence upon feeling, we find that faith in the Unconditioned (as represented by the Three Jewels) arises in dependence upon the experience of the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned existence. At this juncture we have left the Wheel and entered the Spiral; we have begun to move not in a cyclical order, but in a progressive, spiral order. We have, in fact, entered upon the path leading to nirvana. This transition from the Wheel to the Spiral is a moment of conversion. In fact, although it is expressed in different terms, it corresponds to conversion in the sense of Going for Refuge, and there is the same sense of movement - away from the endless round of conditioned existence, towards the infinite Spiral of the transcendental. The transition from the Wheel to the Spiral still leaves us a long way short of Stream Entry, but we could say - mixing our metaphors - that at this stage we begin to enter the tributary which leads, by way of the next six positive progressive links of the Spiral, to the Stream.

In dependence upon faith there arises pramodya, usually translated as satisfaction or delight. This is the feeling which arises when you see that you have no cause for self-reproach because you have not done anything, so far as you can recollect, which makes you feel guilty. You have a perfectly clear conscience. In Buddhism, great importance is attached to this state. If you have anything on your mind that you regret or are ashamed of, anything unatoned for, anything you have not come to terms with, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make any further progress, certainly not progress in meditation. Buddhists therefore carry out various practices of confession of faults and self-purification which eliminate remorse or guilt and replace it with this state of satisfaction and delight, this state in which you are on good terms with yourself.

It is important, of course, to distinguish clearly between genuine remorse for unskilful actions of body, speech, and mind, and the irrational sense of guilt which dogs so many people, often because it has been instilled into them from early childhood, whether through the pervasive Christian doctrine of original sin or by some other means. In Buddhism, confession of faults is a straightforward acknowledgement of whatever one has done out of craving, hatred, or delusion. To be able to confess in this way requires not an abject submission to some external power but an awareness that one is responsible for one's own actions and a confidence that one is capable of developing skilful mental states. As the terms skilful and unskilful indicate, in the Buddhist way of looking at things there is no question of irredeemable evil.

On the basis of this mental state of delight there arises priti, which is usually translated as interest, enthusiasm, rapture, or even ecstasy. It represents an upsurge of joy from your very depths as a consequence of the liberation of all the emotional energies which have previously been blocked up, in the form of various mental conflicts, in the subconscious or even unconscious mind. Something lifts from your mind, freed energy comes bubbling up from within, and you feel much lighter. When all these submerged emotional energies are released, there is an experience not only of release but also of intense joy, enthusiasm, and rapture. It is psychophysical - an experience of the body as well as of the mind - so that your hair may stand on end and you may shed tears.

In dependence upon this experience of rapture, which can reach a very great degree of intensity, there arises prasadhi - repose or tranquillity. This represents the calming, the dying away, of the purely bodily manifestations of priti. And once priti has died away, what is left is a state of happiness, sukha, in which there is no sense consciousness. Sukha, which arises in dependence upon prasadhi, is a purely mental - or rather spiritual - feeling of bliss; this pervades the entire being with a concentrating and integrating effect which harmonizes it and makes it whole. Then, in dependence on this experience of bliss, there arises a state called samadhi. The usual translation is 'concentration', but this is clearly far from adequate. Samadhi is really an experience of perfect wholeness at a very high level of awareness.

At this point - and we have come quite a long way - we need to acknowledge two important facts. In the first place, samadhi is not something which can be acquired forcibly or artificially by means of exercises or techniques. They may be of incidental help, but fundamentally samadhi represents a spiritual growth or evolution of the whole being. It is not enough just to concentrate your mind on an object for half an hour at a time if the rest of your life is pulling in the opposite direction. If ninety-nine per cent of your life is oriented in the direction of the mundane, it is no use just spending half an hour a day trying to orient it in a spiritual direction. That would be like taking an elastic band and pulling it taut - as soon as you release it, it snaps back. Unfortunately, this is how meditation is most commonly practised. Meditation proper, however, represents the spearhead of a basic reorientation of one's whole being. Mere forcible fixation of the mind for a period of time on a certain point or object is certainly not true meditation in the sense of the total growth or spiritual evolution of the whole being.

The second fact is that it is possible for us to fall back from these first seven stages on the Spiral. Although they are part of the Spiral, although they do not constitute a cyclical reaction, although they are part of the path to nirvana, regression from them is possible. Even when you have gone up to samadhi, you can descend into bliss. From that you can lapse into tranquillity, from that into rapture, from that down into faith - and in that way you re-enter the Wheel. And this, of course, is what usually happens. Even if we really succeed in getting up the Spiral so far, up all those seven stages, it is only for a while. Even if it is a real experience, a real development - even if we are not just pulling the elastic - the experience is only temporary and we still fall back. We can balance ourselves at that level for a few minutes, but then we sink down and down until we are once again going round the Wheel. This happens because this section of the Spiral, these seven stages from the experience of unsatisfactoriness up to samadhi, are still subject to what we could call the 'gravitational pull' of the round of existence, the Wheel of Life.

So what is the point of it all? Is there any more sense in the spiritual life than in the endless chore given to Sisyphus in Hades, of pushing a great stone up a mountainside just so that it can roll all the way down again? Or can we get so far up the Spiral that there is no possibility of regression? Is it possible to reach a vantage point from which there is no falling back to the Wheel, or are we bound to go up and down like a yo-yo for all eternity?

The eighth positive nidana provides the way out of this dismal predicament. In dependence upon samadhi arises yathabhuta-jnanadarsana - 'knowledge and vision of things as they really are'. In other words, in dependence upon the pure, concentrated, integrated, totally balanced mundane mind, at the highest pitch of its development, there arises transcendental wisdom. So how does this come about? What is really involved in this development?

Knowledge and vision of things as they really are arises when, in the state of samadhi, we get our first glimpse of Reality itself, free from all veils and obscurations. It's like the moment when you get up to the top of a high mountain and the clouds roll aside to reveal the vast expanse of the horizon. Samadhi represents getting to the peak, the vantage point from which you can see Reality itself.

But how, in practice, do we glimpse Reality? Does it just arise spontaneously, or can we consciously work towards the experience? Well, the answer is that both are possible. For some people, Insight does come quite spontaneously. We don't know why a vision of Reality is just 'given' to some people - perhaps the reasons are hidden within the depths of their past lives. But one need not wait around for the experience to arise spontaneously. It can be developed on the basis of samadhi or, to put it more accurately, the conditions for the possibility of its arising can be created. It is not that you do this, that, and the other, and then you get knowledge and vision of things as they are, like getting a bar of chocolate out of a slot machine. The arising of Insight is not within the sphere of causality at all. We are dealing, after all, with the Unconditioned.

According to the Buddhist tradition, we can induce this experience (without of course implying anything artificial or even causative by such an expression) through the contemplation, in a state of samadhi, of the three marks or characteristics (lakshanas in Sanskrit) of all conditioned things. These characteristics are that conditioned things are unsatisfactory, impermanent, and, in the depths of their being, devoid of self - devoid, that is, of any separate, unchanging individuality which might mark them off from all other things.

Another way of approaching this experience is to contemplate the idea of nirvana. I say idea because we have not yet got nirvana itself into view; but in the state of samadhi we can bring to mind the idea of nirvana, in whatever way appeals to us. As we are doing this, a flash of Insight may illuminate what nirvana really is, and at that instant we enter upon the transcendental path of vision, the darsana marga; or, to bring in another of the metaphors which describe this moment, we enter the Stream.

Another way to put it, of course, is the one mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. At this point one's personal centre of gravity has permanently shifted from the conditioned to the Unconditioned, so that from now onwards one is not just oriented in the direction of nirvana, but actually moving irrevocably towards it. From this point on progress is assured, because one has reached that part of the Spiral which is not subject to any gravitational pull from the mundane, from the Wheel of Life.

To develop the metaphor of gravity a little, we may say that one's progress is rather like that of a space probe launched from the Earth. After a certain distance - so many thousand miles - it is no longer so affected by the Earth's field of gravity and begins to be influenced instead by the gravitational pull of the Moon, Mars, or whichever body it is heading for. So at a certain point the gravitational pull of the Wheel of Life ceases to have an influence, and one begins to feel more and more powerfully and decisively the gravitational pull of the Unconditioned, of nirvana. This is the moment of conversion within Buddhist practice, the beginning of the transformation from a conditioned to an Unconditioned mode of being. According to Buddhist tradition, if we reach up this far, if we undergo conversion in this sense, we are assured of Enlightenment within no more than seven further rebirths in the wheel of conditioned existence.

All this is to look at the experience subjectively - from within, as it were. It can be described more objectively as consisting in the bursting asunder of three fetters. This is, of course, to bring in another metaphor - and again it is a traditional one. The Pali Canon enumerates ten fetters which bind us to the Wheel of Life. When all ten have been broken, Enlightenment is attained; the Stream Entrant is said to have broken the first three of them. The first of these three fetters is satkaya-drishti, usually translated as 'self-view' (satkaya means 'personal' or 'individual', and drishti means 'view' or 'doctrine'). Satkaya-drishti is the view that 'I' constitute something ultimate; that I, as I know myself here and now, with this particular body and mind, this particular history, represent a sort of unchanging, fixed entity. In other words it is the belief that 'I' am real.

This 'fixed self-view' is the biggest mistake of all, according to Buddhism, and it is the first fetter to be broken; you cannot enter the Stream unless you overcome it. Indeed, you do not enter the Stream at all. The whole point is that you cannot enter the Stream until you have detached yourself from name and form, from personal existence, from all the things that you think of as being 'you' - in short, until you have realized that you are not ultimately real. This is not to say, of course, that there is no such thing as the 'self', though this is how the Buddhist doctrine of anatman (literally 'no-self') is often misunderstood. The point is that we do not have an unchanging self. There is nothing fixed, 'underneath it all', about us; every single aspect of our being is subject to change. We have an empirical reality, it could be said, but not an ultimate reality. So this fixed self-view is a tremendous fetter, and one which is not easily broken.

The second fetter is vicikitsa, which is usually translated as 'doubt', although it is not really so much doubt as doubtfulness. It is a sort of wavering or hesitation. You hear about the Buddha, you listen to his teachings, you meet people who are trying to put those teachings into practice, but you hesitate. You say: 'Yes, well, it sounds good, but...', 'I'd like to give it a try, but...', 'I have nothing against it, but...'. That 'but' which is always coming in indicates that you are bound by the fetter of doubt. You don't quite believe, but you don't quite disbelieve either; you are wavering and hesitating between the two, which is a horrible state to be in. Unfortunately it is also a very common state. So many people go along to Buddhist groups and hear a few lectures, or read a few books, but never actually do anything about it. Vicikitsa is this kind of refusal to commit oneself unreservedly to the spiritual life; you hear about it, talk about it, but you keep holding back. How can you become a Stream Entrant if you persist in dithering on the bank? If you want to swim, it is no use hesitating on the edge wondering how warm or cold or deep the water is - you just have to jump in. Vicikitsa is that fear of jumping in, that refusal to commit oneself, that viewing from a distance without participating.

The third fetter is silavrata-paramarsa. This always used to be translated as 'dependence upon rites and ceremonies', a translation which has given rise to a great deal of misunderstanding. Sila means a moral observance or precept, vrata means a religious practice or observance (an example given in the scriptures is the Brahminical practice of tending the sacred fire), and paramarsa means attachment or clinging. This fetter therefore represents dependence upon moral rules and religious practices as ends in themselves. This does not mean that practices such as observing the Precepts and engaging in religious ceremonies are a fetter in themselves; such practices are of course very beneficial. It only means that if we cling on to these practices, forgetting that they are only means to an end, they will become a fetter which holds us back and prevents us from entering the Stream.

Precepts and practices become fetters when you carry them out almost as if you were hypnotized, without thinking: 'What does this mean?' 'Where is this getting me?' 'Is this actually doing any good?' So this fetter is really - roughly speaking - about conventional morals and religion. Conventional attachment to

morality and religion, though not bad in a way, doesn't get you very far along the spiritual path, and it can even prevent you from entering the Stream. You can meet people who seem very ethical and noble, who observe all the Precepts, but who are a bit obsessed with their own virtue, a bit 'holier than thou'. They make a whip of their own virtue - as the saying goes - with which to beat other people. It is not that we should discard such things as precepts and devotional practices; that would be to go to the opposite extreme, which would be even more damaging. We need to make full and exhaustive use of them, but always remembering that they serve a purpose that lies beyond them.

As long as these three fetters - belief in one's 'self' as ultimately real, refusal to commit oneself unreservedly to the spiritual life, and dependence on moral rules and religious practices as ends in themselves - remain unbroken, no Stream Entry is possible. No escape from the gravitational pull of the conditioned is possible. One is bound to fall back down the Spiral and continue circling round the Wheel of Life. In other words, only with the breaking of these fetters is real conversion within Buddhism possible - conversion, that is, in the sense of a permanent transition from the conditioned to the Unconditioned mode of awareness and being.