Lecture 12: the Turning about in the Deepest Seat of Consciousness

So Far We Have Certainly Thought of conversion in Buddhism in very radical terms. It is not enough to convert to Buddhism; we need to experience conversion within the context of our Buddhist practice, at ever deeper levels. It is not enough to think in terms of our own spiritual development; we need to think in terms of the spiritual welfare of all living beings. And we can think of conversion in more radical terms still. We can think of it in terms of a shift in the very nature of our experience of the world.

The ordinary experience which we have almost all the time is firmly and securely based on subject-object dualism. All our knowledge, all our thinking, takes place within the framework of this dualism - subject and object, me and you, `me in here' and `the world out there'. But the Enlightened mind is completely free of such dualism. It's an experience of just One Mind - cittamatra, `mind only' to use the terminology of the Yogacara, one of the two main schools of Mahayana Buddhism in medieval India. The experience of the one mind is like a great expanse of water, absolutely pure, absolutely transparent, with nothing in it, not a single speck, other than the water itself.

Between the experience of One Mind and our ordinary, everyday consciousness, based as it is on subject-object dualism, there is obviously a great gulf. To go from one to the other requires a tremendous change, a complete and absolute reversal of all our usual attitudes. The Yogacara insists on this very strongly. The spiritual life doesn't consist in a little chipping away here, a little chipping away there, a slight improvement here, a slight improvement there. It involves a complete turning about, even a complete turning upside-down. Before we can make the leap from ordinary mind, empirical mind, to the One Mind, all our established values and attitudes and ways of looking at things have to be turned topsy-turvy.

This reversal, this great change, this great death and rebirth, is what the Yogacara terms the paravritti, and this technical term gives us an entirely different angle on the meaning of conversion in Buddhism from those we have so far examined. Some scholars translate paravritti as `revulsion', but this is not really satisfactory because it implies a psychological process rather than a spiritual and metaphysical one. It is much better to use the literal translation of paravritti - `turning about'.

The paravritti, the turning about, is synonymous with conversion in the very deepest and most radical sense of the term. It is the central theme of the Lankavatara Sutra, and indeed we may say that it is the central theme, the central concern, of the spiritual life itself. If the spiritual life doesn't turn you upside-down, if you don't feel as though you're hanging head downwards in a void, then it isn't the spiritual life. If you feel all safe and secure and firm and nicely going ahead, step by step, you haven't yet begun to live the spiritual life in earnest.

Before going into the nature of this turning about, let's have a brief look at its scriptural source, the Lankavatara Sutra. In Nepal, continuing an originally Indian tradition, they have a list of ten canonical scriptures which they regard as constituting the fundamental Mahayana canon, and the Lankavatara is one of them, so we can say that it is one of the ten most important sutras in the Mahayana tradition. In fact, it was not only the Nepalis who had a high regard for this particular sutra. It was a seminal work for the Yogacara, and it was also central to the development of Ch'an (or Zen), having been taken from India to China (so it is said) by Bodhidharma, the founder of Ch'an Buddhism. According to the legends, Bodhidharma went wafting over the ocean from India to China on a reed, and didn't take anything with him but his robe, his bowl, - and a palm-leaf copy of the Lankavatara Sutra. It was no doubt by reason of its tremendous emphasis on personal experience and inner realization that the sutra exerted such a strong influence on Zen. Indeed, whole schools of Buddhism have devoted themselves to the study of just this one text; it is certainly one of the most exhaustive and profound sutras in the Buddhist canon.

The full title of the work is the Saddharma-lankavatara Sutra. Sutra means a discourse of the Buddha, saddharma means `the good law', or `the real truth', and lankavatara means `entry into Lanka', so we can render the whole title as `The Buddha's discourse on the entry of the real truth into Lanka'. Lanka is a city or castle situated on a mountain-top in the ocean somewhere off the Indian coast. In Indian literature, of course, Lanka usually stands for what we call Sri Lanka, but here no such specific identification can be inferred; in this sutra we are in the realm of myth rather than geography.

The sutra is a fairly lengthy work of nine chapters, the English translation by D.T. Suzuki running to about 300 pages.<$FThe Lankavatara Sutra, trans. D.T. Suzuki, Routledge, London 1932.> It contains a large number of extremely profound and valuable teachings, though in a rather scattered form, the text being an anthology of extracts or excerpts in no systematic order. But of the immense number of topics with which the sutra deals, we are here concerned with only one: the paravritti, the turning about.

The first chapter of the Lankavatara is called `The Invitation of Ravana', Ravana being the king of the Rakshasas, the beings who inhabit the island of Lanka. In Buddhist texts Ravana appears as a wise sage, a great disciple of the Buddha, but it is interesting to note that in Hindu texts such as the Ramayana he is the villain of the piece; this only goes to show that there is always more than one way of looking at not only a particular religious doctrine but even a particular individual. According to the introduction to the sutra, Ravana invites the Buddha to preach (a conventional Buddhist procedure - one is generally invited to preach rather than taking the initiative oneself). In response the Buddha delivers a succinct and profound discourse, as a result of which Ravana experiences the paravritti.

It seems to him that the whole universe vanishes and all that is left is an expanse of absolute consciousness, or absolute mind, within which there is no differentiation of subject and object. Furthermore, he hears a voice proclaiming that this is the state which has to be realized. It is this experience, this change in Ravana's consciousness from awareness of the ordinary external universe in all its discreteness and diversity to awareness of absolute mind, free from all distinction between universe and void, which constitutes what is called the paravritti.

To understand how this process of turning about happens, we need to refer to a rather technical but absolutely fundamental aspect of the Yogacara teaching called the system of the eight vijnanas. Vijnana is usually translated as `consciousness', but that is not exactly accurate. The prefix vi- means `to divide' or `to discriminate', and jnana means `knowledge' or `awareness', so we can translate vijnana as `discriminating awareness'. Vijnana therefore refers to awareness of an object not just in a pure mirror-like way but in a way which discriminates the object as being of a particular type and belonging to a particular class, species, or whatever. In the Yogacara teaching there are eight of these vijnanas, eight forms of discriminating awareness or consciousness. The first five are the five `sense vijnanas', the modes of discriminating awareness which operate through the five senses - through the eye with respect to form, the ear with respect to sound, and so on.

The sixth consciousness is called the mano-vijnana. Mano means simply `mind', so this is discriminating awareness functioning through mind. Mind, by the way, is usually classified in Buddhism as a sort of sixth sense, so it doesn't have a special elevated position above the five sense consciousnesses. According to Yogacara psychology, there are two aspects of mano-vijnana. The first of these is awareness of what we might describe as `ideas of sense' - in other words, the mind's awareness of impressions presented to it by the five senses. And the second aspect is awareness of ideas which arise independently of sense-perception, out of the mind itself. This latter aspect of mano-vijnana is of three kinds. First of all, there are the ideas and impressions which arise in the course of meditation, as when one experiences light which doesn't have its origin in any sense impression but comes from the mind itself. Then secondly there are functions such as imagination, comparison, and reflection. And thirdly there are the images perceived in dreams, which again come not from sense impressions but directly from the mind itself. All this is the mano-vijnana.

Seventhly, there is the klishto-mano-vijnana. Klishto means `afflicted', or `suffering', and it also means `defiled', because defilement is a source of suffering. This mode of awareness, therefore, is afflicted or defiled by a dualistic outlook. Whatever it experiences, it interprets dualistically in terms of a subject and an object - subject as self, and object as world or universe. So everything is seen in terms of pairs of opposites: good and bad, true and false, right and wrong, existence and non-existence, and so on. This dualistic mode of discriminative awareness or consciousness is, of course, what characterizes the way we usually live and work.

The eighth consciousness is called the alaya-vijnana. Strictly speaking, however, this is not a vijnana at all, because in it there is no discrimination, but just awareness. Alaya literally means a repository or store, or even treasury; we are all familiar with the word in the compound `Himalaya', which means `the abode of snow' or `the repository of snow'. This `store consciousness' has two aspects: the `relative alaya' and the `absolute alaya'. The relative alaya consists of, or contains, the impressions left deep in the mind by all our previous experiences. Whatever we have done or said or thought or experienced, a trace or residue of it remains there; nothing is absolutely lost. The relative alaya, in fact, is not unlike Jung's collective unconscious, although this is a very approximate analogy which cannot be pushed too far. The Yogacarin School conceives of the impressions which are deposited in the alaya-vijnana, the consequences of our various thoughts and deeds, as `seeds' (bijas). In other words, these impressions are not passive; they are not just like the impression left by a seal in a piece of wax. They are active impressions, left like seeds in the soil, and when conditions are favourable they sprout up and produce fruits.

Alaya in its absolute aspect is Reality itself, conceived of in terms of pure awareness free from all trace of subjectivity and objectivity. It is a pure, continuous, and non-dimensional - or even multi-dimensional

- awareness in which there is nothing of which anyone is aware, nor anyone who is aware. It is awareness without subject and without object, something which is very difficult for us to apprehend.

It is at the level of the alaya - the `deepest seat of consciousness' as Suzuki calls it<$FD.T. Suzuki, Manual of Zen Buddhism, Grove Press, New York 1960, p.14.> - that the turning about with which we are concerned takes place. We can say (although the Lankavatara itself does not actually say this explicitly) that the turning about takes place at the borderline separating the relative alaya (that is, alaya as a sort of collective unconscious) from the alaya as Reality, as pure awareness.

How this actually takes place is not at all easy to describe, but the texts give us some hints. What we can say is that as we go through our lives, we have all sorts of experiences of one kind or another, all the time, every day, every hour, every minute; and as a result more and more impressions accumulate in the relative alaya. These impressions are known as `impure seeds', because the thoughts, words, and deeds which deposited or sowed them are defiled by our dualistic outlook, especially - to put it in more ethico-psychological terms - by our craving, our aversion, and our fundamental spiritual ignorance. However, just as, in consequence of our ordinary actions, we can deposit impure seeds, so we can also deposit and accumulate `pure seeds'. These are pure impressions or traces, produced by our more spiritual thoughts, words, and deeds. The more we devote ourselves to the spiritual life, the more we accumulate spiritual impressions or traces - or pure seeds - in the relative alaya.

There comes a point when so many of these pure seeds are amassed in the relative alaya that the absolute alaya (which `borders' on the relative alaya) starts to push on them. And as the absolute alaya presses on the pure seeds, they in turn bring their weight to bear upon the impure seeds, and in the end they push them right out. It is this pushing out of the impure seeds that constitutes the turning about within the alaya, within the deepest seat of consciousness. Once this has taken place, a complete transformation is set up within the entire vijnana system, and the eight vijnanas are transformed into what are called the five jnanas, usually translated as the five knowledges or wisdoms. The eight modes of discriminating awareness are transformed into five modes of pure - that is, non-discriminating - awareness or wisdom. Hence the term jnana. Vijnana means discriminating awareness, but jnana means simply awareness.

These five jnanas or wisdoms represent the five aspects of Enlightenment, and they are personified in Buddhist iconography as five Buddhas of various colours. The first five vijnanas, the sense-consciousnesses, are collectively transformed into what is called the All-performing Wisdom. This wisdom, which is capable of doing anything, is personified by the green Buddha, Amoghasiddhi, whose name means `Infallible Success'. So the five ordinary sense consciousnesses start functioning as the all-performing wisdom, or the all-performing awareness. The next one, the mano-vijnana, the mind consciousness, is transformed into Distinguishing Wisdom, the wisdom which appreciates the infinite variety of existence down to even the minutest differences. This is personified by the red Buddha, Amitabha - `Infinite Light'.

As for the klishto-mano-vijnana, the defiled mind consciousness, this is transformed into the Wisdom of Equality. It is a characteristic of the defiled mind consciousness to see things in terms of subject-object duality, in terms of opposition or conflict, but once the turning about has taken place, this is transformed into an awareness which sees everything as equal, sees everything with complete objectivity, and has the same attitude of compassion towards all. It is not that differences are obliterated, but one becomes aware that running through the differences - and even not different from the differences - is a thread of unity, of sameness. All things are equally void, equally one pure mind. This is personified by the yellow Buddha, Ratnasambhava, whose name means `Jewel-born One'.

The relative alaya is transformed into what is called the Mirror-like Wisdom, which reflects everything impartially and without distortion, which does not stick or cling to anything, but sees things just as they are. This wisdom is personified by the dark blue Buddha, Akshobhya, `the Imperturbable'.

The absolute alaya, of course, is not transformed at all, because it does not need to be transformed. It is equivalent to the fifth wisdom, the Wisdom of the Dharmadhatu, the wisdom of the universe perceived as fully pervaded by Reality, the Absolute Wisdom. This is personified by the white Buddha, Vairocana, whose name means `the Illuminator'. Just as white is composed of all the colours of the rainbow, so this is the basic wisdom of which the other four are aspects.<$FFor more details of the iconography and symbolism of the Five Buddhas, see Vessantara, Meeting the Buddhas, Windhorse, Glasgow 1993, Part 2.>

In this way, after the turning about at the alaya level has taken place, the eight consciousnesses become the five wisdoms, and one is utterly transformed - transformed into an Enlightened being, a Buddha,

functioning in these five different ways, with these five modes of awareness. In other words, as a result of the paravritti, as a result of this turning about, this conversion, one's whole being and one's whole consciousness is transformed, translated, from an unenlightened level to an Enlightened level.

There still remains unanswered, of course, the usual practical question. How do we bring about the paravritti? It can hardly come about by accident. According to the Yogacara, although we have eight modes of consciousness, we normally function only on the basis of the first seven. Our five sense-consciousnesses function vigorously all the time we are awake, the mind consciousness keeps on functioning whether we are awake or asleep, and the defiled mind consciousness is of course very active indeed. But the alaya - the relative alaya and especially the absolute alaya - is normally hidden from us. The highest level of consciousness to which we normally have access is the klishto-mano-vijnana, the level of the mind defiled by duality, by seeing things in terms of opposites, especially subject and object, self and other. So this is the level on which we have to operate. We have to work with the tools that lie to hand.

It is at this level, therefore, with this dualistic outlook, that we take up various spiritual practices. For instance, when we take up meditation our ultimate goal is non-dualistic, but our practice is necessarily dualistic. Here we are sitting meditating, while the object of our meditation - our breathing, or maybe a mantra - is, as it were, over there. The basis is dualistic because that is how we are constituted, that is the level on which we are functioning. All our various religious practices and spiritual exercises, especially meditation, are taken up on the level of the defiled mind consciousness. But by means of these practices on that level, impressions of a better type are left; pure seeds, as the Yogacarins call them, are accumulated. And eventually, as we practise day by day, week by week, year by year, enough pure seeds are deposited in the relative alaya for the turning about to take place.

We should not feel discouraged at the thought of all the time and effort this will take. It's rather like dropping a depth charge. If you are out at sea in a boat and you want to cause an explosion right down in the depths, you may have to spend hours or even days assembling the various component parts of the depth charge, and priming and adjusting the mechanism. And you do all that on the deck, even though you want to produce an effect many fathoms below. It's no use getting impatient and thinking: `Why waste all this time putting it all together here on deck? Why not just throw the stuff overboard and hope for the best?' Spiritual practice is rather like that. It is easy to get discouraged, and think: `I've been meditating (or doing some other practice) for all these weeks and months and years, but I'm still not Enlightened. I haven't even entered the Stream. What's going on?' Even when we feel we're not getting anywhere, though, the important thing is to carry on, because all this work has to be done at the level of the defiled mind consciousness in order to produce the required result at the level of the alaya.

This reminds me of a story I heard when I was in southern India many years ago, visiting the ashram of Ramana Maharshi, one of the most famous Hindu teachers of this century. Someone had apparently asked him how it is that our spiritual practice sometimes seems to have so little effect. We do all this meditation, we read all these scriptures, we give all these gifts, but nothing seems to happen. We're just the same, apparently. So the questioner wanted to know why this was - why was there no change, no improvement? In reply, Ramana Maharshi told a little story.

He said: `Once upon a time there was a man who wanted to split into two an enormous rock. So he went up to the rock with a great sledge-hammer, and swinging it with all his might he delivered a terrific blow, right in the centre of the rock. Nothing happened. So he drew a deep breath, flexed his muscles, and delivered another great blow in the same spot. Nothing happened. The rock stayed perfectly intact, just as it had been before. So, in the same way, sweating more and more, struggling more and more, panting for breath, the man delivered blow after blow, until he had struck the rock nineteen times. Still nothing happened. There was not a mark, not a dent. The man thought, "All right, now or never," collected all his strength, and gave one last tremendous blow. And with that twentieth blow, the rock split neatly, cleanly, quietly, into two halves.'

So were the first nineteen blows completely useless? Was it just that last one that did the trick? No. Although no result could be seen, with each blow the rock was weakened along the line where the hammer struck. The twentieth blow just gave the last touch which was needed to split the rock. Though the results could not be seen, they were there all the time.

It is just like that when we work at the level of the defiled mind consciousness, hammering away at the rock of the empirical self. It may seem that our spiritual practices aren't producing any results. We may think: `I'm the same person that I always was. I get angry just as easily. I'm just as greedy, just as interested in worldly things. Nothing has happened.' But all the time, at a deeper level, something is happening: blows are being struck, pure seeds are accumulating, the depth charge is being prepared. The

important thing is to keep going, not to get discouraged by apparent failures or temporary setbacks, not to give up.

There are just two more crucial points to be stressed. The teaching of paravritti draws attention to the fact that in the religious life an intellectual understanding is not enough. People who have read many books on the subject might think they have a good understanding of Buddhism, but according to the Lankavatara this is not enough. `No dependence on words and letters' is the Zen way of putting it.<$FSee Sangharakshita, The Essence of Zen, Windhorse, Glasgow 1992.> Through its doctrine of paravritti, the Lankavatara is saying that there must also be a definite spiritual experience. There must be a conversion, a tremendous change in our mode of awareness, our way of looking at things, and our way of behaving, for there to be any real spiritual life at all. This is the first basic point that this doctrine is making. Most of the time we are just acquiring intellectual information from external sources; there is no fundamental modification of the quality of consciousness itself. But it is this radical transformation in the mode of our consciousness - as the Buddha says in the Lankavatara - which is the point of the whole exercise. There must be this turning about, even turning upside-down - or, as Nietzsche says, `a transvaluation of all values' - in which we see things not just in a slightly different way, but in a totally different way, with all our previous values reversed. We must be prepared even for that.

The other significant point implied by this doctrine is that the turning about, this conversion, is sudden - that it takes place in an instant. Here we can see at once the connection with the Zen idea of `sudden Enlightenment', and it should now be clear what is really meant by this idea. Unfortunately it is still commonly taken to mean that you can get Enlightened easily and quickly, without any trouble at all. You just go along to the library, take out one or two books on Zen, read them, and hey presto! There you are! - Conveniently forgetting that the books themselves say `No dependence on words and letters'. Indeed, `a book on Zen' is really an absolute contradiction in terms. Where there are books, there is no Zen - or one might say, where there is Zen, there are no books. At least, there is in Zen no dependence on books, no reliance upon them. Conversion, Enlightenment, or satori, is sudden only in the sense that the splitting of the rock is sudden. All the other nineteen blows had to be made. In truth, then, the splitting is not sudden at all. It only appears to be so because its coming about has been taking place at a different, deeper level, hidden from view.

So it is true that the paravritti, the conversion, is sudden, that it takes place in the twinkling of an eye, but the preparation for it takes a very long time. There are no short cuts; a very great deal of discipline, training, and meditation is necessary. This is true not only with regard to Zen, not only with regard to the Yogacara School or the teaching of the Lankavatara. It holds good for all forms of Buddhism. Whether you take up the Theravada, or Zen, or Tibetan Buddhism, the culminating experience may come suddenly in a flash, but the process of building up to that experience takes a very long time. It may take the whole of your life. But if you believe that the experience itself is worthwhile - is indeed the only truly meaningful aim of human life - then of course you will not begrudge the time spent.

In this overview of the meaning of conversion in Buddhism, I hope that we have clearly established at least one fact. This is that conversion in Buddhism is a complex and arduous task. It is all too easy to say Buddham saranam gacchami and consider oneself to be converted to Buddhism, but it is really not so simple. Conversion to Buddhism or conversion within Buddhism, whether in terms of Going for Refuge, Stream Entry, the arising of the will to Enlightenment, or the turning about of the mind in the deepest seat of consciousness, is by no means easy. We have to build up to it over a period of days, weeks, months, and even years, because it takes place on a very high level indeed, a level on which we do not usually function.

This is, however, the level on which we have to function eventually if we take our Buddhism seriously, if it is to mean more to us than an intellectual pastime - if, in short, we are really to experience conversion. And our conversion is complete only when the aim of the Buddhist path is fulfilled, when our practice of Buddhism has taken us through these levels of conversion right to the turning about in the deepest seat of consciousness, to Enlightenment itself.