

Lecture 26: Nirvana

Venerable Sir and Friends

Those of you who come here regularly, or even those who come very often, will know, because it's a fact which I often emphasize, will know that Buddhism in its entirety, the whole teaching of the Buddha in its entire vast historical development, is a very very big subject indeed. You'll know further that this whole vast subject of Buddhism comprises so very many different aspects: the metaphysical, psychological, the ethical, the meditative, the artistic, the buddhological, as we may call it, and so on. Furthermore we have so many different teachings relating to so very many different aspects of the spiritual life, man's spiritual needs, problems and so on. And therefore we find the Buddha himself saying, in one part of the scriptures, that the Dharma, his teaching, his doctrine, his truth, is like the ocean.

And one of the reasons why it's like the ocean, one of the respects in which it resembles the ocean, is inasmuch as it contains so very many different jewels. The text of course is not content simply with saying jewels; it's got a whole long list of precious and semi-precious stones which are to be found in the depths of the ocean. And in the same way, the Buddha goes on to tell us, in the depths of the Dharma there are these so very many precious teachings, dealing with all aspects of the spiritual life.

Now in this series, in this series introducing Buddhism, with which we've been concerned from the beginning of the year, we're trying to cover just some of these different aspects of Buddhism. We've had, as some of you will no doubt recollect, so far altogether ten lectures. We've discussed the necessity of religion in general and then of Buddhism in particular. We've tried to understand what the correct approach to Buddhism should be. We've surveyed Buddhism in England. We've discussed Buddhism again in terms of that very modern concept of evolution. We've discussed it in terms of the lower and of the higher evolution, spiritual evolution. We've tried to understand what is meant by the Buddha, what is meant by man himself. We've also tried to plumb, if not the depths at least the surface of those very important traditional formulations of the five aggregates, the five heaps into which man's being is divided; the twelve nidanas or links of the chain of conditioned co-production, and last of all, last week, the three laksanas or characteristics of all conditioned existence.

So these are the aspects, or some of the aspects, we've covered so far, just some of the jewels, some of the treasures, that we've tried to fish up from the depths of the Dharma ocean. Now sooner or later in the course of a series like this, sooner or later in the course of any attempt to be comprehensive with regard to Buddhism, sooner or later one must come to that very important, very relevant topic of Nirvana. So that is what we come to today, this evening. Perhaps I may say that I'm quite happy to come to it, partly because in the past, in the course of my experience, I have discovered that Nirvana is, one might say, rather a popular subject with audiences of people interested in Buddhism. One finds, perhaps rather surprisingly, that people are always eager, if not anxious, to hear about Nirvana.

I remember in the course of my life in India sometimes going about from place to place by train. In India one finds that people aren't at all backward about introducing themselves or getting into conversation. Sometimes it happened that no sooner had I taken my seat in the compartment of a train, someone comes up to me and says, 'You seem to be a Buddhist monk. Please tell me - what is Nirvana?' They're just as straightforward, very often, as that. And very often also, not only in India but in this country too, after a meeting, especially in meetings outside London, where people don't very often get a chance of asking questions of Buddhist monks, very often the question comes up after one has given a lecture: what is Nirvana? It seems to be a word that many people have heard. They might even have seen it in a dictionary or in various writings; they've heard it or read it, they don't know quite what it's all about, so they take the opportunity of putting the question: what is Nirvana?

Now one can say that this sort of question, this sort of interest, is quite natural, quite understandable. I don't know how many millions of Buddhists there are in the world today. This

question of religious statistics is quite a controversial one. Some people, if you read various books on comparative religion, some people will tell you that there are about six hundred million Buddhists, while others will whittle it down to about fifty million. It's of course entirely how one reckons. But we can say this - that if we look at the various Buddhist countries of the world, if we look, either in our own imagination, or if we see programmes on television about Buddhist countries, or even read articles in magazines about Buddhist countries, we shall see, we shall find, that in these countries Buddhists, as Buddhists, are engaged in so many different activities.

You can see Buddhists meditating. I remember some time ago in the American magazine *Life* there were some quite impressive photographs of young monks meditating, Zen monks meditating in Japanese monasteries, sitting in rows upon rows. You just saw the backs of their shaven heads, their long black robes, and there they were apparently sitting and meditating hour after hour in the silence and tranquillity of the Japanese Zen monastery. It was quite an impressive picture.

Then again, one sees in Buddhist countries people worshipping. Some people of course don't like this word worshipping in a Buddhist context - they think it's rather inappropriate - but we'll use it, at least provisionally. You see people going very often in the early morning up the steps of the temples, carrying their flowers and their candles and their bundles of incense sticks, and you see them kneeling down and making their offerings, chanting various verses of praise to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and then going about their daily business. And especially you'll see them doing this on the occasions of the great festivals, such as the festival of Wesak or Vaishaka or 'Shagadawa?', which we shall be celebrating very shortly, in only a few weeks time, when they spend the whole day, or even three whole days, in this manner.

Then again, if one takes a look at the various Buddhist countries, one will see so many of them, especially the monks, engaged in various branches of Buddhist studies. In some cases you'll see them poring over palmleaf manuscripts, brown with age, perhaps hundreds of years old. In other places, like Tibet or Mongolia, at least in the old days, one would see them opening and unwrapping, turning over the pages of enormous xylograph volumes, which perhaps a very young novice by himself, by his own unaided effort, can hardly even lift. You see them writing books investigating the doctrine, giving lectures and so on.

And then, if one turns especially to the lay people, particularly in the Theravada countries of southeast Asia, one will find them on so many occasions giving alms to the monks, when they come with their black begging bowls, to the poor, to beggars, and even, in some Buddhist countries, if not most Buddhist countries, even giving food and drink, and shelter and medical treatment, what to speak of human beings, even giving it to animals.

And then again if one surveys these Buddhist countries, one will see some people taking the Refuges and Precepts, some going into retreat for two or three months or even years; and some again one will see presenting themselves in the monasteries, presenting themselves at a chapter of the Sangha, the monastic Order, having their heads shaved, putting on the yellow robes and becoming monks.

So when one sees unfolded before one's eyes, either in the imagination or through television or on the radio, or in the course of one's reading, when one sees unfolded this whole vast panorama of Buddhist activities - all this meditating and studying and preaching and teaching and practising - the question which arises is: Why? What's the reason for it all? What's the moving spirit, the great impulse behind it all, what is the reason, what is the explanation for all these activities? What are all these people trying to do? What are they trying to get? What are they trying to achieve? What are they trying to realize through their meditation and their study and their almsgiving and their worshipping and so on, in all these multifarious ways?

Now the traditional reply to all this of course is very simple. If you go up to any of them, whether monk or layman, or nun or laywoman, if you go up to any of them, if they're at all conversant with their faith, and most of them are, at least in a humble, simple way, if you put the question to them, 'Why are you doing this? Why are you meditating? Why are you giving alms? Why are

you studying?' then they'll give you the traditional reply. They'll say, 'We're doing this for the sake of the attainment, the achievement, the realization, of Nirvana.' In Ceylon they'll say Nibbana, in Burma they may say some other word, I don't know the Burmese word; the Japanese will say nehan?; the Tibetans will say palpa? - but they'll give you substantially the same reply: it's all for the sake of Nirvana, liberation, Enlightenment.

So therefore, with reference to all these various, these multifarious strands of Buddhist activity, the question arises, the further question arises: What is this Nirvana? How is it to be explained? How is it to be understood? One gropes of course after analogies. One tries to go from the known to the unknown. If one has a Christian background one will try to envisage it as a state of sort of eternal life, in heaven, after death. If one is of another way of thinking one might think of Nirvana even as a state of complete annihilation or extinction.

Now it isn't really very difficult to answer this question as to what is Nirvana? It isn't very difficult. The texts are pretty clear as to what it is and what it isn't. I can say myself that in the course of my experience in India, even in this country, I've often spoken on this subject of Nirvana. In fact, as I've already told you, it is even rather a popular subject. And one can say that a talk, a lecture, on Nirvana, usually goes down with people quite well. One finds that after hearing all about Nirvana, people go away from the meeting rather happily, with quite a clear idea as to what Nirvana is and also quite a clear idea as to what it is not.

The procedure on these occasions is quite simple, quite straightforward. One usually begins by discussing the etymology of the word Nirvana, whether it means a blowing out or whether it means a cooling down, and so on and so forth. And one usually goes on then to explain that Nirvana, at least according to the Pali texts, consists in the extinction of all lobha, or greed or craving or desire; all dvesa, anger or antagonism or hatred; and all moha, mental confusion or bewilderment. Nirvana is the extinction of all these three unwholesome roots.

Then one usually goes on to say that Nirvana is a state of supreme, of incomparable bliss, to which the bliss of this world cannot be compared. Also, if one wants to go into the subject a little in detail, one describes the two kinds of nirvana: the klesa nirvana, nirvana consisting in the extinction of all passions and defilements; and skandha nirvana, that is to say, nirvana as consisting in the extinction, or the waning, of the skandhas, the five aggregates or heaps of psychophysical existence, which takes place upon the death, as we call it, of the person who has already gained klesa nirvana during his lifetime.

One can furthermore go on to the different interpretations of Nirvana in the Hinayana, the Mahayana, the Vajrayana, the Madhyamika, the Yogacara, Zen, and so on and so forth again. And of course one shouldn't forget, one doesn't forget to explain that Nirvana is neither eternal life, in the Christian sense, nor annihilation or extinction. These are the two extreme views about the nature of Nirvana. Here, as elsewhere, one has to follow the middle path.

So this is the usual procedure, this is the usual, the standard, one might almost say the stereotyped pattern for a lecture or talk about Nirvana. And as I've said, people go away after hearing such a talk, such a lecture, quite happily, and one can say with regard to such a talk or lecture that in this way a good time is had by all.

Now this evening I don't intend to go through this routine or this procedure. I intend this evening, or at least will try this evening, a rather different approach, some would say perhaps a rather unorthodox approach. But I don't think it's really so. Perhaps I might observe in passing that orthodoxy is a much abused word in modern Buddhism, and if one wants to know perhaps what it really mean, well, you can turn to the article which appears, or which has been appearing for three months, in 'The Buddhist', on 'The meaning of orthodoxy', which is significantly subtitled 'A Protest'.

Now Nirvana is said to be the goal of Buddhism. Those of you who attended the talk on evolution, lower and higher, will remember that on our chart Nirvana was represented by the symbol for infinity, at the end of the whole process of the higher evolution. So Nirvana is

commonly spoken of as the goal of Buddhism and of Buddhists inasmuch as they are Buddhists. Now this is as though to say that there are different groups of people in the world, religiously, politically, culturally and so on, different groups of people existing, and that they have so many different goals: some after power, some after wealth, some after satisfactions of various kinds. So in the same way there is in the world a group of people called Buddhists, practising Buddhism, the teaching of the Buddha. And their particular goal is what they call Nirvana. That's what they're trying to reach, what they're trying to realize.

So we are therefore really concerned, when we speak about Nirvana, with the idea of a goal. So let us try to begin with to understand what is meant by this idea or this conception of a goal to be attained or realized or achieved, and then try to see, try to understand, to what extent this idea or this conception of a goal is applicable to Nirvana.

Now this rather different type of procedure obviously suggests a word of warning. We generally tend to think that words like goal and so on can be applied to Nirvana as it were almost automatically. We tend to use terms rather loosely, without any clear, any vivid idea of what they mean. And in particular we're rather inclined to transfer terms and expressions derived from our mundane experience to our spiritual experiences, even to the transcendental itself. And of course we very often find that they don't quite fit, sometimes even that they don't fit at all.

So with this in mind, let's get back to the idea of a goal. A goal means an objective. It's something we have to strive either to be or to have. We can even say that these two, being and having, are the same, because we can say having is a sort of vicarious being. A goal is something that we want to be. Suppose, for instance, our goal is wealth. We can say that our goal is to possess wealth, or that our goal is to be wealthy, but obviously the possessing, the having, is reducible to the being, the existing.

Now a very important point which arises here is this: that we can want to be only that which we are not. Obviously we don't want to have or to be that which we already are, that which we already have. We want to be that which we are not. And this suggests, quite obviously, that we're dissatisfied with what we are. If we're not dissatisfied with what we are, we shall never strive to be that which we are not. Suppose, just by way of example, our goal happens to be money, material possessions. Well, we make these things our goal - we want to be wealthy, to possess wealth - because we're dissatisfied with being poor. And in the same way when we make, say, knowledge our goal, when we want to know, to add to our knowledge, to accumulate facts, investigate principles, we want to do all this, want to be all this, we want to be possessed of knowledge, to know, because we're dissatisfied with our present state, that is to say, our state of being ignorant.

So this is the pattern, this is the procedure, this is what always happens. We become aware of a certain poverty in ourselves, something missing, something lacking, something absent, and we want to try to gain, to achieve, that which is absent, that which is not. All this is quite familiar; the process is quite familiar. And we can say that on its own level it's a perfectly right and correct procedure. But unfortunately it's all extended into the spiritual sphere.

Take another example. Suppose I have a problem, a personal problem. Let's say that that problem is the possession of a rather bad temper. I get irritated, I get upset, even angry, rather easily. Even a small thing is enough to spark me off. I see some people looking at other people, but better if we look at ourselves. So the possession of this bad temper, even this persistent irritability, makes me, and makes other people very often, very disturbed, if not actually from time to time miserable.

So what happens? One fine day, either on our account, or on account of what other people tell us, what they bring to our notice, we realize our state. We feel so wretched, so uncomfortable, so miserable; we feel so dissatisfied with being like that, that is to say, being bad-tempered, that we think 'All right, it's time all this ended. It's time it came to a stop.' So what do we do? We set up, we construct for ourselves a goal, the goal of being good-tempered. We think 'Well, here I am now, I'm bad-tempered. It's a source of misery to me. I must get rid of it. I must be

good-tempered. That's my goal. Here I am, a bad-tempered person. I'm going to achieve this goal of being good-tempered, of being sweet-tempered, always returning the soft answer, turning the other cheek and all that sort of thing.

So we set up this goal and we try to reach it, we try to realize it, try to make ourselves, as it were, good-tempered, sweet-tempered. But what usually happens? I'm sure you can all tell me this. We almost always, if not invariably, fail. If we succeed at all, it's only momentarily, just once or twice. We check ourselves, we control ourselves, but before very long, before many days have passed, certainly before many weeks have passed, we're back again in the same old rut. And we usually of course blame it onto other people, onto external circumstances.

Now why is this? Why does it happen? Why is it that I'm not able really to cure my own bad temper, to become good-tempered? What's the reason for the failure? It's a question which concerns all of us because we all have problems of this sort, if not the problem of bad-temperedness or irritability, certainly other problems of an analogous nature, so it concerns us all. What's the reason for the failure, the great, even catastrophic failure? The reason is that all the time we're really unaware of the cause, the reason, the fundamental deep down cause and reason of our being bad-tempered. And if this isn't resolved, if we don't know why we are bad-tempered, what is making us irritated, what is prompting, really, the angry answer or the violent reaction, we can't possibly hope to become good-tempered. It's not of course just a question of intellectual understanding, just knowing objectively, theoretically. It's something much more than this.

Now we can extend, we can generalize a little more. We can say that most of our problems, if not all, really boil down to this problem, or this question, of happiness or unhappiness in one form or another. Even this question of good and bad temper is a question really of happiness and unhappiness. Bad temper is a problem for us, or we realize it's a problem, because it makes us miserable, it makes us unhappy. But taking this wider view, this wider perspective, what usually happens? We feel unhappy for some reason or other, we feel miserable, ill at ease, even tormented.

Now we don't usually really ask ourselves why. If we do ask at all why, we ask only superficially, we only skim the surface, and we get, or we give ourselves, only a very superficial answer, in terms of symptoms, in terms of externals. What we usually try to do is to escape, to get away, from the experience, the feeling, of being unhappy and to be happy. We don't usually ask ourselves, we hardly ever really deeply ask ourselves 'Why am I unhappy?' We simply see or we feel or we realize that we're unhappy, that we're miserable, discontented, and we simply ricochet as it were, or try to ricochet, from that experience into an opposite state or experience of feeling happy. And this usually means grasping at some object or some experience which we think, which we believe, will give us the happiness which we lack and which we seek.

In other words, what happens is we set up happiness as a goal and we try, we strive, to achieve it. We feel unhappy, so we set up this goal of happiness, and we try to get away from our feeling, our experience, of unhappiness, and to reach the goal of happiness. Now here also, as you know very well, we nearly always fail. After all, our whole lives through, in one way or another, we're in search of happiness. No one is in search of misery. No one's in search of unhappiness. Everyone's in search of happiness, everyone sets up happiness as a goal, but everybody fails to reach it, everybody fails to realize it. There's no one who could possibly say that he's so happy that he couldn't imagine himself being a little happier. Most people, if they're honest with themselves, have to admit that their lives, their whole life in fact, is more or less one of unease and dissatisfaction, punctuated with little flashes of happiness, joy, which make them temporarily forget, if not their actual misery, at least certainly their discomfort and discontent.

So this brings us, all this discussion brings us, to a most important conclusion, which is that the setting up of goals is really a substitute for awareness, for self-knowledge. As I said, if we find ourselves bad-tempered, we don't try to understand, to be aware of why we are bad-tempered, we simply, almost automatically, set up the goal of being good-tempered. If, taking the more general view, we feel unhappy, miserable, instead of trying to understand why very deeply, we

automatically, almost instinctively, set up a goal of being happy in order to get away from the unhappiness and the misery. But it's all automatic - there's no real awareness, no real self-knowledge in it all at all. But that's why I say, that's why I state as an important principle, this conclusion, that the setting up of goals in this way is really a substitute for awareness or for self-knowledge.

We shouldn't really try to escape from ourselves. We should begin by accepting ourselves just as we are. I say 'begin'. We should try to understand not just intellectually but much more deeply than that why we are what we are. If we're suffering, well, accept the fact we suffer - but why? Or, as the case may be, if we're happy, well, accept the happiness - don't feel guilty about it - and understand why. This isn't something that's just intellectual; it's something that has to go very deep down indeed.

For some people this sort of understanding, this sort of penetration, this sort of insight will come in the course of meditation. Meditation isn't just fixing the mind on an object. It isn't just revolving a certain idea in the mind. Meditation really involves, among other things, getting down to what we may call the bottom of one's own mind, and illuminating one's mind from the bottom upwards, as it were, exposing one's motives, the deep-seated causes of one's mental states, one's experiences, one's joy and one's suffering and so on. In this way real growth, we may say, in awareness will come about and will take place.

Now suppose now we come back to this question, this subject, this problem if you like, of Nirvana. It may seem as though we've rather strayed away from it, but one very often finds that if one tries to go too directly to a subject, one misses it. One has to prepare the ground, one has, rather like a plane before it lands, one has, as it were, to go round and round before one can really come down on the subject. Now you know from your reading of books and listening to lectures that it's possible to describe Nirvana in various ways. For instance, it's possible to describe Nirvana as the supreme bliss, as the supreme happiness. The Dhammapada, for instance, does this. One of the verses in the Dhammapada says 'Nirvana paranam sukham' - 'Nirvana is the supreme bliss, the supreme happiness, the supreme joy.'

Now suppose somebody, suppose you yourself, feel unhappy. Suppose you are going through rather a difficult period. There have been lots of upheavals, lots of upsets, and you're feeling rather low, rather miserable. So in that state, in that condition, you read a book or you hear a lecture, in the course of which it is stated that Nirvana is the supreme happiness, Nirvana is the supreme bliss. So what's your reaction? You think, 'Good. That's just what I want - bliss, happiness.' So you decide to make Nirvana your goal. Now this, one may say, is the height of unawareness - nothing to do with Buddhism at all. One just latched onto Nirvana, labelled as the supreme bliss, because it happened to fit in with one's subjective needs and feelings at that particular time. But this is what is happening constantly. We try to use, as it were, Nirvana, in a quite unaware, unconscious, almost automatic way, for the solution, for the settlement or the resolution, of problems which can only be resolved through awareness.

What we should do, or what such a person should do, is to begin by accepting his unhappiness, at least face up to the fact 'Well, I'm unhappy.' Even 'I'm miserable. I'm absolutely miserable.' In other words, accept oneself as an unhappy self to begin with, don't try to cover it up, don't try to put on that beautiful smile and make everybody think that well, you're just on the top of the world, as it were. Be cheerful with other people certainly, don't get them down with your gloom and sorrow, but at least don't disguise the fact from oneself. Accept the fact that one is unhappy, that one is an unhappy self. So study this unhappy self, one can even say live with it side by side, don't try to shove it away, don't try to get rid of it. Live with it and ask oneself, try to see deeply, what is it that makes one unhappy? What's the cause, what's the source of the misery? Don't clutch at a way out of it. Don't try to put a goal of non-misery of happiness, not even of Nirvana. Don't try to postulate that too quickly or too unconsciously. Just try to see more and more clearly, more and more distinctly, what it is in oneself that is upsetting one, which is making one miserable and which is making one unhappy.

So if one can do this, if one can see this more and more clearly, again one can say there's some

possibility that gradually, eventually, Nirvana will be attained. But certainly not by using the idea of Nirvana as the supreme bliss or in any other form as an escape from unhappiness, without being aware of what the cause of the unhappiness is. It's the awareness, it's the self-knowledge, which is the important thing, the all-important thing.

Perhaps at this stage one can indulge in a little paradox. One can perhaps say that the goal of Buddhism consists in being completely and totally aware at all levels of why we want to reach a goal, or we can say, in awareness of our need to reach a goal. We can also say, going a little further, that Nirvana consists really in the complete awareness of why we want to reach Nirvana. If you understand fully and completely why you want to reach Nirvana, then you've reached Nirvana. You can even go further than this. We can even say that the unaware person is in need of a goal, but on account of his unawareness is unable to formulate a goal, a true goal. An aware person, on the other hand, on account of his awareness, is able to formulate a goal, but he doesn't need it. That's really the position.

Now let's come back to this meeting and this talk. I said at the beginning that it would have been quite easy to give a conventional account of Nirvana - it's this, it isn't that, and so on. But suppose that had been done, then what would have happened? What would have happened is that you would have accepted or rejected this aspect of Nirvana or that aspect of Nirvana in accordance with your own largely unconscious needs.

Suppose you feel an unconscious need for happiness, well, when I said Nirvana's the supreme bliss you would have thought 'Well, that's what I want', you would have latched on to that, and you would have settled down in that, without really realizing what you were doing. If on the other hand you're rather sensitive to your lack of knowledge and understanding, had I said 'Nirvana's a state of complete illumination', again, half-consciously you would have latched onto that. And in the same way, if you were rather oppressed or overpowered by a sense of your own life being constricted or restricted, not having any freedom, not being able to move about as you want - tied down to a job or a family, and so on - well, had I mentioned that Nirvana is freedom, emancipation, you would have thought, 'Well, that's what I want.' So in this way there would have been a half-conscious or semi-conscious setting up of goals without really trying to understand why you were unhappy or why you were ignorant or why you were conditioned, why you were tied down. Nirvana would just have been used as a sort of semi-conscious stop gap, and this would not of course have been very helpful.

So I'd like therefore, before we come to the end of today's talk, I'd like to suggest a question for you to ask yourselves. Here you all are this afternoon. You could have been somewhere else. At least you could have been at home, in front of the television set, or wherever you might have been if you hadn't been here, or you might have been out for a walk perhaps this afternoon, or visiting friends, but you're not, you're here at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara. So presumably, since you are here, and since most of you knew that the topic of today's talk was going to be Nirvana, it can be assumed that you're all interested, however slightly, in hearing about Nirvana, about what you all must recognize as the goal of Buddhism.

Now the question for you to ask yourselves is this. Why have I come? Am I really interested in this subject? Have I got a sort of burning desire to know what Nirvana is? It may be that one has come simply because one comes every Sunday. One's heard all about the five aggregates, one's heard all about the twelve nidanas, one's heard all about the higher and lower evolution, so one might just as well hear something about Nirvana, just for the sake of completeness. It may be that you've come to oblige a friend. Someone happened to be with you and said 'Well, I'm going along to the vihara, why not come with me?' So you didn't like to refuse, you thought, oh well, it's only an hour or so, it's not very far. I can go to the pictures afterwards. Let's go along. It may be for this reason. It may again be just out of curiosity, intellectual or otherwise. One might have thought well, Nirvana, I wonder what he'll have to say about that? It's rather a tough sort of nut to crack, and let's see.

But even so, even if one gives all these answers, further questions can still be put. Supposing one does come every Sunday - but why? After all, there must be some reason. Some people have

come every Sunday for a month, or every Sunday for three months, a few every Sunday even for a year or more, with very few days off in between. So what's the real reason for this recurrent pattern of activity, this sort of urge to come to the vihara every Sunday afternoon? Well, suppose we have come just to oblige a friend - why do we want to oblige him or her? What's the reason for that? Or suppose we're just curious about Nirvana? Well, why are we curious about it? What's the reason for our curiosity, what's underneath it?

So in this way we can go deeper and deeper and deeper - not going so much metaphysically as psychologically - and in this way, by following this sort of procedure, we can learn quite a lot, not so much about Buddhism in the purely objective historical sense but about ourselves and our motives. So if we do this, if we pursue this line of questioning, even though it might sound a little unconventional or unorthodox, we will very likely get much more out of it, even with regard to Nirvana, than we would have got out of a formal lecture of the conventional type about Nirvana as the goal of Buddhism. And if we pursue this particular quest, this particular line, asking ourselves, trying to penetrate, trying to plumb as it were the depths of our own mind all the time, then we may even get a little nearer to the goal of Nirvana itself.

Sometimes it happens that we have to decide to make a great change. We're looking out all the time, even out at Nirvana, thinking of it in ontological terms. But sooner or later the day comes when we have to reverse our attitude, when we have to start looking within and examining our own motives, the motives even of our own curiosity with regard to this subject of Nirvana, in other words to go not ontologically but psychologically. And this is much more likely to bring us nearer to awareness, a true awareness, to Nirvana, than any amount of purely metaphysical or psychological disquisition. It may also, we may say, prepare the ground a little and perhaps make us more ready, more prepared to hear, next week, something about an even more profound and important topic than Nirvana itself, and that, as you'll be hearing in the course of a few minutes, will be the Mystery of the Void.