

## Lecture 27: The Mystery of the Void

Friends, As you all know, at present we are in the midst of Easter, of the Easter holidays, and Easter, as I hardly need remind most of you, Easter commemorates, according to Christian tradition and belief, the crucifixion and also the resurrection of Christ. Now a number of Christians, if not the majority of orthodox, of practising Christians, take these two events which Easter commemorates, that is to say the crucifixion and the resurrection, quite literally. They regard them as being essentially historical facts. They believe that Christ was quite literally crucified, and that quite literally in his physical body he was resurrected, and subsequently of course ascended into heaven.

Now Buddhists don't believe that. So far as we can see, the crucifixion may actually have occurred. It may be a historical fact; there's nothing intrinsically improbable or impossible in someone being crucified in those days for whatsoever reason. It was a well-known form of punishment under the Roman government, the Roman empire of those days. But the resurrection and the ascension, a Buddhist would say, are most certainly myths. Now, one must be a little careful how one uses the word myth. When we say that something is a myth, or that something is mythical, we don't mean, or at least we shouldn't mean, that it isn't true. When we say that the crucifixion or the resurrection is essentially or primarily a myth, we don't mean that they're not true. We mean rather that whatever truth they possess is spiritual rather than scientific. Most people think that truth is necessarily factual, necessarily, as it were, scientific, but we can also say that truth in the deeper sense, spiritual truth, is poetic, is non-factual, even non-scientific.

So from a Buddhist point of view we may say that the crucifixion, the resurrection, the whole festival of Easter in fact, represents a spiritual rebirth after a spiritual death. It really represents what we may describe as a triumphant emergence of a new mode of being, even a new mode of awareness, from the old. Those of us who are familiar with Zen, for instance, will know that Zen speaks, very often, in terms of dying the great death before one can attain the great Enlightenment. So perhaps we may say, perhaps we may be permitted to say, that from a Buddhist point of view the festival of Easter represents, spiritually speaking, something of this sort, an association of spiritual rebirth, of new spiritual life, following upon spiritual death.

It is, incidentally, quite significant that the festival of Easter takes place in the spring, when summer is about to begin, when the trees are bursting into new leaf, when we begin to hear the birds singing again after they have been silent for so long during the long winter months. According to the Venerable Bede, in his Ecclesiastical History of the English People, the word 'Easter' is from an old Anglosaxon word Eostre, which apparently, according to him, was the name of a pre-Christian, British goddess - most likely it was a fertility goddess. And it is in fact rather interesting to note that in connection with Easter, the festival of Easter, not only in this country but in a number of Christian countries, quite a number of pagan customs are still being continued - for instance the giving of Easter eggs. This has really nothing to do with Christianity at all. There's nothing about the giving of Easter eggs in the Bible, for instance. You don't read in the Bible story of the crucifixion and the resurrection that the Apostles, or any other of the disciples of Christ, gave one another Easter eggs on that occasion.

But what it means, what it symbolizes, what it represents, is quite clear. The egg, the unbroken egg, is a symbol of life, especially a symbol of new, renascent life. And this symbol of the egg, representing a new birth, a new life, a resurrection in the widest sense, is of universal occurrence. We don't find it only in Christianity. We don't find it only in connection with Easter. We find it in practically all religions, all traditions, all over the world. Just to give one simple example, if one goes to Italy one finds in the Etruscan tomb paintings representations of the dead. And one finds that the dead are very often depicted on the walls of their own tombs reclining on classical couches and holding in their hands, in their outstretched hands, an egg, a symbol of their belief that death was not the end, that death would be followed by a new life. All this from about 1000 to 700 BC.

And in Buddhism too we have in the literary sources, the scriptural foundations of Buddhism, the same sort of figure of speech, the same sort of symbolism. In Buddhism, especially in the

Mahayana, the Bodhisattva, the one who is bent upon Enlightenment, the one who has produced the Bodhicitta, the thought of or the will to, the aspiration towards Enlightenment for the benefit of all, is spoken of the Buddha in the scriptures as one who has emerged or as one who is in process of emerging from the eggshell of ignorance.

So this shows us that even this Christian festival of Easter has overtones or undertones of which the ordinary Christian, the orthodox Christian, is quite oblivious. In fact, one might even go so far as to say that despite the Bishop of Woolwich, most Christians know nothing of all this at all. One might even say that they think still or at least that they think that they think that Christ was not only crucified literally but that even he was resurrected literally and ascended into heaven in his physical body. That still is the official doctrine of the churches. For instance, in the 39 articles of the Church of England, one reads that he ascended into heaven together with his flesh, blood and bones, and all that appertains thereto. They all went up into heaven quite literally and physically and sat down, presumably on a physical seat, at the right hand of the Father.

So so long as these rather crude literal beliefs are still officially entertained and current, it isn't of course possible for Buddhists to celebrate Easter as Christians do, and that presumably is why we are all here this afternoon instead of being decently in church. But though we are not celebrating Easter, we're certainly not unmindful of Easter. We're certainly taking advantage of the fact that Easter in this Christian land is a holiday, and we're observing it Buddhistically. We have, as most of you know, our own programme, over this long weekend, of meditation and lectures and other functions.

Now today, which is Easter Sunday, we have the twelfth talk in our series introducing Buddhism. But though it's a talk in this series, it isn't, at the same time, unconnected with this festival of Easter. The crucifixion and the resurrection, these are regarded or were regarded in ancient times, in apostolic times, as among the mysteries of Christianity. It's rather significant that in the history of Christianity one talks of dogmas only at a later stage. In the earlier, the more primitive stages, as represented to some extent still by the Eastern Orthodox churches, one speaks of the mysteries of Christianity.

Now we may say that Buddhism has also its mysteries. And today we propose to speak on one of the greatest of all these Buddhist mysteries, perhaps the greatest of all, insoluble to many people: that is to say, the mystery of the void. The void is of course the Sanskrit and the Pali word sunyata, and this is usually translated into English by the word 'emptiness', very often 'voidness'. Now emptiness or voidness is literally correct. It's quite an exact, quite a correct philological translation of this word sunyata. One could even make out a good case for translating sunyata as 'nothingness', as Dr H.V. Guenther does. One could even translate it as 'zero'. In modern Indian languages zero is sunya - as in 1, 2, 3 and so on, zero - sunya. But all these more or less literal philological translations can be most misleading, as we shall see.

Now it will have been noted already perhaps that we don't speak of the theory of sunyata. We don't speak of the doctrine of sunyata. We don't even speak of the philosophy of sunyata. We speak instead of the mystery of sunyata, the mystery of the void or the mystery of emptiness - because this, quite truly, is what it really is. It's a mystery. One might even go further than that and one might say, in a very famous phrase used in a quite different context, that the void is not just a mystery; it's a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. That's what the void, that's what emptiness, sunyata, really is.

And it is a mystery, a great mystery, the greatest even of all mysteries so far as Buddhism is concerned - not just because it's an abstruse theory or a very difficult doctrine or a particularly involved piece of Buddhist philosophy. It's a mystery, a deep mystery, because it's not a theory or a doctrine or a philosophy at all. Sunyata or voidness or emptiness - these are just the words, these are just the labels that we use - sunyata is essentially an experience, what we can only describe as a spiritual experience, even a transcendental experience. And as such the mystery of sunyata as an experience, it is incommunicable. That's why we describe it as a mystery. We know that usually in popular books, even scholarly books, lectures, discussions, articles about Buddhism, sunyata is usually spoken of as though it were a doctrine, a theory, a philosophy, and

nothing more than that. But that's a very great mistake indeed. One might even say it's a catastrophic mistake, because it precludes all possibility of greater understanding.

Now by this I don't mean that there is no doctrine of sunyata, or theory of sunyata, or philosophy of sunyata. We have all those things, quite definitely, in Buddhism. But what one means is that sunyata, or what is connoted by this word sunyata is not primarily a philosophy, not in the first place a philosophy, but an experience, a spiritual, a transcendental experience. And what we call for want of a better word the philosophy of sunyata, the theory of sunyata, is only a formulation of that experience, that spiritual or transcendental experience, in conceptual terms, in terms of thought, in terms of intellectual understanding. And this formulation, we may say, is mainly for purposes of communication, just for getting it across, for communication, that is to say, between the Enlightened, those who have the experience of sunyata, and the unenlightened, those who do not have any such experience; that is to say in the first place, initially, historically speaking, between the Buddha and his immediate disciples.

Now what we've just said, what we've just emphasized, in fact is true not just of sunyata. It holds good of all the important doctrines, as we like to call them, principles if you like, of Buddhism. They're all based on, they all ultimately issue from, experience, originally the Buddha's experience, of Enlightenment. And they all point the way, in their own terms, within their own respective contexts, to our own experience of the truth they represent, which we usually designate by such words as 'Enlightenment', 'Nirvana', 'emancipation', 'spiritual freedom', and so on. And all these so-called doctrines, all these formulations, are all just parts of the raft, parts of that raft of the Dharma, the purpose of which is to take us across the waters of birth and death, the flood of conditioned existence, to the other shore of Nirvana. And as such, as parts of the raft, they are not an end in themselves, but only a means to an end.

So this we should bear in mind, in fact always bear in mind when we study Buddhism, especially with regard to this so-called doctrine or theory or philosophy - really experience - of sunyata, voidness, or emptiness. We should never forget that what is to be conveyed by this word, expressed by this word or even just hinted at by this word is essentially a mystery, and as such something to be experienced in the equal mystery of one's own personal spiritual life.

Now this sort of warning, as one may even call it, is particularly necessary in the West, because here in this country also our approach to Buddhism tends to be rather one-sidedly intellectual. We tend to approach Buddhism too much with our brains, not even just with our minds. So I say just with our brains very often - not trying to feel it, not trying to experience it, but just trying to think it, to understand it, in a purely abstractly intellectual way. So when studying things like sunyata we have to bear this in mind and try to correct that one-sidedness. As a matter of fact, we can say that that sort of one-sidedness is already being corrected to some extent. It's becoming even less and less true to say, though true to some extent, but less and less true to say that the approach of English people to Buddhism is rather over-intellectual, because meditation - not just the theory of meditation, but the practice of meditation, in some of its forms at least - is now quite well established in this country. And we may even go so far as to say that the devotional, even the social elements are gradually also being introduced.

Now what we call sunyata is not just one thing, not even one experience. We may say it represents a whole vast range or spectrum if you like of experiences. Traditionally there are no less than thirty-two kinds of sunyata. And all these thirty-two kinds, I can assure you, are diligently studied in Mahayana countries. There the monks know at least the names of these thirty-two kinds of sunyata off by heart; they just rattle them off like that. And especially is this true of Tibet.

In this connection I remember a little incident, once again of course from Kalimpong, from my life and experience there. I remember that some time ago, quite a few years ago, I happened to be with a Tibetan friend of mine who had been at one time a high-ranking Tibetan government official, in fact he was governor of Gyantse for a number of years, and he was subsequently married to Maharaj Kumari Kukulla, the eldest daughter of the Maharaja of Sikkim. So I remember once we were altogether, and this friend of mine's wife, Princess Kukulla, she just

laughingly said 'Well, when we're in Lhasa my husband is never at home. He's always in the monasteries discussing Buddhism with the lamas. I hardly ever see him' she said. So I said to Punkan Se ?, 'Well, what is it that you discuss with the lamas? What are the favourite topics of discussion? Or what is even the favourite topic of discussion, when all the other sort of intermediate topics, preliminary topics have been exhausted, what do you usually get down to?'

So he thought a while and he said, 'Well, usually, after we've discussed one or two more or less ordinary things, what we really like to get down to and really go into' - and he said 'Sometimes we discussed it all night - is the 32 kinds of voidness.' So this, it seemed, was the most popular topic for discussion between Buddhist monks and laymen also in the monasteries of Tibet. And that's why, apparently, that wives of Buddhist gentlemen in Lhasa apparently don't see much of their husbands for days together. They're busy exhausting the 32 kinds of voidness.

Now perhaps here in this place we may have one day a series of talks on all the 32 different kinds of voidness - we certainly couldn't do it all in one talk. But today we're confining ourselves to the four principal kinds of sunyata, because these are the most important. We shouldn't think too literally that you've got four kinds of sunyata, just as you might have four different kinds of cabbage, or four different kinds of daffodil and narcissus. But the four kinds, as we call them, really represent four successive stages in our experience, our progressively deepening experience, of the mystery of the void.

But before we go on to them I want to say a few words about the Perfection of Wisdom literature. The Perfection of Wisdom literature, canonical literature or scriptures, represents we may say probably the most important group, single group, of Mahayana sutras. A sutra, as you may remember - sutra in Sanskrit, sutta in Pali - is a discourse of the Buddha, either long or short. Now there are in the Buddhist canon, in its Chinese and Tibetan versions, also the original Sanskrit, more than 30 Prajnaparamita or Perfection of Wisdom sutras. Some of these are very long indeed - they're several bulky volumes long; others are very short, just a page or even in one case a sentence, and even just a letter, the letter A, in which the whole mystery is supposed to be summed up.

And all those, more than 30 of them, long and short, have been translated, luckily for us, into English by Dr Edward Conze. And this is really a very very epoch-making work. We can only say that we are most fortunate in English-speaking countries because we have to begin with practically the whole of the Pali canon in English, and then we've got the whole of the Perfection of Wisdom literature. If we have a few other works and a good collection of Tantras then we'll be well on our way to establishing the three yantras in this country. But for the time being we've got quite enough work to do assimilating the Pali canon and also these translations from the Perfection of Wisdom sutras.

Now among these sutras, these 30 odd sutras, there are three which are of particular spiritual and historical importance: first of all the Diamond Sutra, or Diamond-cutter Sutra, Vajracchedika, and the Heart Sutra, the Hridaya Sutra. These are comparatively short. The Diamond Sutra is about 30 or 40 pages only; the Heart Sutra is just a couple of pages, the longer version three pages. And these sutras, these two great works, summing up the message of all these magnificent texts, are recited daily in the Zen monasteries of Japan, as well as being very very frequently and constantly recited in Tibetan monasteries too. The third sutra, the third Perfection of Wisdom sutra of particular importance is the Ashtasahasrika, which means the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 lines. This is a much longer, and we may say richer work, and it covers a number of aspects of sunyata not covered in the shorter texts.

But all these three works - Diamond Sutra, Heart Sutra, Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 lines - they all deal basically, essentially, with just one topic. As Dr Edward Conze says in his introduction to a translation of one of them, it's just sunyata, the void, emptiness, over and over and over and over again, from different points of view. And they all deal with it not logically, not metaphysically; they deal with it as a direct spiritual experience. In most of these texts it's the Buddha who is speaking, they're his discourses, and he speaks out of the depths, as it were, of his own spiritual, his own transcendental experience. They're called, all these works, Perfection

of Wisdom sutras because it's by means of prajna - wisdom or perfection of wisdom - which is a spiritual faculty, that the truth of sunyata is perceived or intuited. This is as it were to speak dualistically of course. One can say, perhaps more correctly, that sunyata, the voidness or emptiness, and prajna, transcendental wisdom or perfection of wisdom, represent between them the objective and the subjective poles of what is essentially the same non-dualistic experience.

However, let us get back now to our four kinds of sunyata. As we've said, mustn't take them too literally as four distinct kinds. One can say they represent four pinpointings in a continuous ever-deepening experience of reality.

Now first of all we have what is called samskrta-sunyata, literally emptiness or voidness of the conditioned. Now what does this mean? We have to refer back to our talk the week before last. There we saw that Buddhism made basically, to begin with, a distinction between conditioned reality, what is dependent upon causes and conditions, and unconditioned reality, what is not so dependent. Conditioned reality is of course existence as we know it on this earth; and unconditioned reality is, in just one simple word, Nirvana, or the content of Nirvana. Conditioned reality, as we also saw the week before last, is to be recognized by means of three characteristics, the three laksanas; that is to say that conditioned existence is unsatisfactory, suffering, dukkha; impermanent, anitya; and devoid of selfhood, devoid of permanent unchanging individuality, anatman.

Now in the talk the week before last we went into all this in considerable detail, so there's no need to repeat it all yet again this afternoon. In any case, we may say, this teaching of the three characteristics or laksanas, of conditioned existence, is one of the basic Buddhist teachings with which therefore we should be very familiar indeed. If we have been coming here for week after week or month after month, or even for upwards of a year, and we don't yet know quite definitely, quite clearly, what the three characteristics are, well, it's time we got down to our Buddhist dictionary and found out what they really are all about.

Now conditioned reality, characterized by unsatisfactoriness, impermanence, and being devoid of selfhood, unconditioned reality is the opposite of this. It has opposite characteristics. Instead of being unsatisfactory, even painful, it's supremely blissful. Instead of being impermanent it is permanent, even eternal: not permanent or eternal in the usual sense of being everlasting within time, but in the sense of transcending time altogether.

Now what about selfhood? The conditioned is painful; the unconditioned is blissful. The conditioned is impermanent; the unconditioned is permanent. So if the conditioned is devoid of self, then the unconditioned should be, of course, self. But here there's a difference among the Buddhist schools. The difference is largely a difference of terminology. The Theravadins, for instance, say that not only is the conditioned, anatma, devoid of self; the unconditioned, Nirvana, is also anatma, devoid of self. But obviously if one says that the conditioned is devoid of self and the unconditioned is devoid of self, it isn't quite the same thing in both cases. But the distinction in this particular case is not always made very clear. Some of the Mahayana schools, on the other hand, do sometimes speak of the unconditioned, Nirvana, in terms of selfhood, as atma. And in this connection they sometimes speak of it as maha-atma, or the great self. And Zen also, as we know, also uses the expression 'the true self' or 'the real self'.

Now Theravadins usually object very strongly to this procedure, and we can understand the reason behind their objections. There's a very great and a very real danger of what we may describe as hypostasising the self. One wants to get rid of the self completely. So even though in a sense it may be quite legitimate to speak of a higher or greater self, at least in a poetic sort of way, there is the danger that instead of getting rid of the self, one will substitute a comparatively gross self, a gross ego, by a subtle one, a more refined one.

At the same time again it is important that we should realise that really all positive predications about Nirvana are only analogous, not to be taken literally. We speak of Nirvana as the supreme bliss, nirvanam paramam sukham, but it's certainly not bliss as we understand it, not by any stretch of the imagination. Not even if we multiply the bliss with which we're acquainted a

hundred or a thousand times will we get even the shadow of an idea of what the bliss of Nirvana is really like. We're only using the term analogously.

So logically speaking it should be possible to use the word self in the same way, and this is what the Mahayanists do. But they do it of course very very circumspectly, sometimes, not often, and they have of course some canonical authority for this procedure. In several sutras, Mahayana sutras, that is to say, the Buddha does speak of Nirvana as the great self, maha atma. For instance, in the Mahaparinirvana Sutra, which is of course not to be confused with the Mahaparinibbana Sutta in Pali - this is of course a Mahayana vaipulya sutra - but one does find the term great self even in the Pali Canon: maha atta.

This is something which will surprise, even shock, many people; and as far as I know only one modern Theravadin writer has ever quoted this verse. It's a Thai scholar, in a little book which was translated some years ago by our own English bhikkhu Pannabaddha. And this little verse comes in the Anguttara-nikaya, the book of the Gradual Sayings, and it's quite clear that in this particular passage the Buddha himself in Pali is represented as using this word maha-atta or great self in a quite favourable sense. He isn't criticising it or condemning it; he's obviously taking it as a provisional sort of designation for what he's talking about.

Now, while we're on the subject we may say that the Tantras go even further than the Mahayana. The Tantras don't simply speak of the great self. They even go so far as to speak of the great passion and the great anger, and use them as synonyms for Enlightenment in a rather esoteric sense. Of course, all this has to be done very carefully, within a certain prescribed framework or context, but in the East, in the Buddhist countries, where tradition is strong, there's no danger in using these terms. There might be some danger in a non-traditional, a non-Buddhist country like this.

Anyway, let us get back now to this question of samskrta-sunyata, the emptiness of the conditioned, the first of the four kinds of emptiness. We can now begin to see what the expression means. When we speak of emptiness of the conditioned it means that the conditioned, existence or life as we know it, is empty with respect to the unconditioned. Life as we know it, the conditioned, conditioned reality, is characterised by unsatisfactoriness, by transience, and by absence of selfhood; or if one adopts the more Mahayanic mode of expression, absence of true selfhood. It's devoid of, that is to say, in more positive terms, or empty of bliss, permanence and true selfhood, because these are the attributes of the unconditioned.

So therefore the conditioned is said to be empty of the unconditioned and its attributes. In a word, happiness, permanence, true selfhood, these are not to be found in this world. If we want these things we have to look beyond, we have to look up, as it were, to a higher dimension of reality. And this is the first kind of sunyata, samskrta-sunyata, or emptiness of the conditioned.

Now for the second kind, the second type: the asamskrta-sunyata, emptiness or voidness not of the conditioned but of the unconditioned. The conditioned is said to be void, said to be empty, because it's empty of the unconditioned. But when we say that the unconditioned is empty, what is that empty of? Well, the unconditioned is empty of the conditioned. In the unconditioned there's no suffering, no impermanence, no false selfhood, so it's said to be empty of these things, the unconditioned empty of the conditioned.

The unconditioned is also of course the transcendental. Transcendental isn't a very good word. I see some of the Anglican theologians have been criticising it recently, and pointing out that a great deal of confusion of thought has been created in Christian theology by taking it too literally. But in a Buddhist context transcendental, the English word transcendental, simply does duty for the Sanskrit and Pali word lokuttara. Loka is world, uttara means higher or above, so the transcendental, lokuttara, is simply, literally, that which is above or which is beyond the world: not above, not beyond in any spatial sense, but beyond in the sense that it is not anything conditioned; it's beyond all conditionedness, it's beyond suffering, beyond transiency, beyond selfhood, at least beyond false selfhood. It's beyond, above, anything that we can conceive, anything that we can think of, anything that we can imagine. When we come to it, our mind, as

it were, fails. There's almost a great blank before us, which we can't apprehend, but at the same time we can't say that there is nothing there.

So this is the unconditioned, this is the transcendental reality, the goal of what we saw was called, in the Majjhima-nikaya, the Ariya-paryesana, the noble quest; that is to say the goal of the spiritual life - the spiritual life being, as we saw some weeks ago, a noble quest by way of going from the conditioned to the unconditioned, instead of from the conditioned to the conditioned over and over again.

Now many might think, quite rightly from their point of view, that it's impossible to go any further than this. When one has reached the unconditioned, when one has reached the transcendental, surely one has come to the supreme height. One can't go above, one can't go beyond, one can't go further than that. And so far as some schools of Buddhism are concerned, especially what is called the classical Hinayana, especially the Sarvastivada, it isn't possible to go further than that. These schools of Buddhism operate, one may say, with the idea of two mutually exclusive realities, the conditioned and the unconditioned. And this differentiation provides most of us, if not practically all of us, with a quite adequate basis for our spiritual lives.

But the Mahayana, in the Perfection of Wisdom literature, goes even further than this. So we come on from the second kind of sunyata, that is to say emptiness of the unconditioned, we come on to the third, which is maha-sunyata. Maha-sunyata is the great emptiness or the great void. And according to the Mahayana, which is the great yana, it's very great and very empty indeed. It's defined or described as consisting in the emptiness of the very distinction between conditioned and unconditioned, or, in Buddhistic terminology, samsara and nirvana, world and transcendental. Here we are told, or rather in this stage we experience and realize, that the distinction, the distinction between conditioned and unconditioned, samsara and Nirvana, on which our whole spiritual life had been based so far is in the ultimate analysis only mind-made, mind-created. It's only a concept, a conceptual difference, a conceptual distinction, not a real one. All things equally are sunyata, voidness, emptiness: the conditioned and the unconditioned, it's all one voidness, all one emptiness, all one sunyata, maha-sunyata, which embraces within itself all opposites, all distinctions, whatsoever.

So according to the Perfection of Wisdom teachings all things whatsoever, whether great or small, high or low, pure or impure, Enlightened or unenlightened, all beings whatsoever, are all of them one, if we can use this word, unique, ineffable, absolute reality, within which there are no distinctions whatsoever. Not that distinctions are wiped out or obliterated, but that they are not final, only provisional. There's no distinction ultimately - and we're speaking now from a very lofty viewpoint indeed - no distinction ultimately between conditioned and unconditioned, even between Enlightened and unenlightened, if one takes a sufficiently high viewpoint.

Now this might seem to be going far enough; this might seem to be sufficiently rarefied. Perhaps you're getting tired already. But there's still a fourth stage. We've still only come to the third stage. But you might be wondering what that could possibly be. Emptiness of the conditioned, emptiness of the unconditioned, then great emptiness - well, what greater emptiness could there be than great emptiness? But there still is one, the fourth, which is called sunyata-sunyata, the emptiness of emptiness, or voidness of voidness. And this makes it clear that emptiness itself in the last analysis is only an operative concept. Even absolute emptiness, even the great emptiness, is itself empty, not final. So even emptiness, not just conditioned, not just unconditioned, even great emptiness, is to be abandoned. One shouldn't be attached to it; one shouldn't think that it's final, shouldn't cling to it as a dogma or doctrine.

The great Madhyamika teacher Nagarjuna says in one of his writings that the teaching, or rather the experience, of sunyata is intended for the cure of all possible attachments, whether to the conditioned or to the unconditioned or even to the great void itself. It's meant to cure all these attachments to selfhood in its subtlest forms, whether little self or big self or bigger self still. But suppose you become attached to sunyata itself? What happens then? Nagarjuna says it's just like a man suffering from a serious illness, a serious disease. He takes a medicine. Instead of curing him, the medicine turns into medicine. If the medicine itself becomes poison, what will he do?

His case is hopeless. So Nagarjuna says, in the same way, sunyata is meant to cure all attachment. If you become attached to sunyata, your case is hopeless. The medicine has turned into poison, and there's nothing that can be done about that.

So be very careful. He even goes so far as to say, he says 'Better to be attached to an atma, a self, as high as Mount Sumeru, rather than be attached to the idea of sunyata, the voidness.' Because if you're attached to the idea of atma, self, well, that can be cured with the medicine of sunyata, voidness. But if you're attached to the voidness, well, what medicine is there to cure that? So, he says, be very very careful. Never use sunyata, never consider sunyata, as a concept, dogma, a doctrine, then become attached to it, not even attached to it as an experience, because then, well, however high you may be, you can still suffer a fall. So be careful, he says most emphatically.

Now when we say that sunyata is sunyata, we're really trying to say that emptiness cannot even be expressed in terms of emptiness. Emptiness is beyond even emptiness. So what is the most appropriate mode of expression for this stage, for this fourth kind of sunyata? Obviously it's only, not a long, elaborate explanation and commentary and sub-commentary, but just - well, what you're hearing now - silence. So perhaps we should really end there. Perhaps we have begun to see, perhaps begun to feel that sunyata, emptiness, voidness, is really ultimately a mystery; not only a mystery, even the greatest of all mysteries, so far as the Buddha's teaching is concerned. We can't really explain it. We can't really describe it. The idea of giving a lecture on it is really quite ridiculous. We can only at best give little broken hints, suggestions, little fingers pointing to, stabbing at the moon, but millions of miles below the moon. And if these little hints, these pointings, are not taken too literally, then some of them may be able to function as helps, as aids, to that experience of sunyata, conterminous with the experience, of course, of supreme Enlightenment itself.

As we said, as we emphasized at the beginning, sunyata is basically an experience, not a doctrine, not a theory, not even a philosophy, just an experience. First of all, our experience of the emptiness of the world. The experience of the world, such as we know it, contains nothing, quite literally nothing, or as they sometimes say in modern media, repeat nothing, of real interest or real value. That's the first experience: that it's empty. So because this world is empty, one directs one's attention to the transcendental, the unconditioned. One becomes absorbed in it, as it were, and one finds, to one's delight, we may say, that it is empty of everything mundane. What one found in the world one doesn't find here. In the world there was suffering, here one finds bliss. In the world there was impermanence, here one finds permanence, eternity. In the world there was no true selfhood; here one really, as it were, by losing oneself, finds oneself, and one becomes absorbed, therefore, in this unconditioned.

And eventually the time comes when one is so absorbed in the unconditioned that one forgets all about the conditioned. And then one gets so absorbed in the unconditioned itself that one forgets all about the unconditioned. And having forgotten about the conditioned and the unconditioned, one loses all sense of distinction between the conditioned and the unconditioned, the mundane and the transcendental. And then, of course, after one has got there, if one can use terms which suggest time, such as before and after, after that one reaches a state, or the state which only silence can express and communicate. And of course in that silence one experience in its ultimate depth, its ultimate reality, what we have called the mystery of the void.