

Lecture 28: The Stages of the Spiritual Path

Some of you I know have attended this series from the very beginning, and have heard practically all the lectures. Some of you I know have heard perhaps even all of them; and, no doubt, you already will have appreciated the fact that we have between us covered quite a lot of ground in the course of these last three months or so.

The first four talks, of course, were merely introductory. After that we came onto a talk on evolution; lower evolution and higher evolution, in the course of which we tried to place the whole Buddhist teaching within a rather more contemporary framework than is usually attempted. Then followed two talks on the Buddha. First of all as man or as Superman, and then, in relation to god and in relation to Reality.

After that, we came onto the Dharma; the Dharma being the second of the 'Three Jewels', as they're called in Buddhism, even as the Buddha himself is the first. And this group of talks on the Dharma, the second of the 'Three Jewels', began with talks on three of the most important doctrinal categories of Buddhism. First of all there was a talk on the analysis of man, dealing with the five skandhas or aggregates or heaps; then one on the dynamics of being, dealing with the twelve nidanas or links in the chain of dependent origination, and including a brief treatment of the whole subject of karma and rebirth; then finally one on the texture of Reality, dealing with what are called the three laksanas, the three characteristics of all mundane or conditioned existence - that is to say, its unsatisfactory, transitory, and insubstantial nature.

Then we had a lecture, a talk, on that most important topic, representing the goal of Buddhism or the spiritual life - that is to say, Nirvana. And finally, three weeks ago, the last talk which we had in this series, at the time of Easter, was one on the mystery of the void, in the course of which we tried to penetrate a little the mystery of sunyata.

Now today we come to a fresh group of talks - that is, a fresh group within the present series. And this group of talks within this series will bring the series to a close. This group will deal with the Sangha. The Sangha is the third of the Three Jewels, even as the Buddha is the first and the Dharma is the second.

Now the first of these three talks on the Sangha, the one which we're having today, will deal with what are known as the stages of the path. Then the week after next - because next Sunday we'll be celebrating Vaishaka, as you'll be hearing presently - the week after next we shall be studying something about the Sangha in the sense of the spiritual community. And lastly we shall conclude this group of talks, and therewith the whole series of talks, with one on the pattern of Buddhist life and work.

Now in this group of talks the emphasis, one may say, will be practical rather than theoretical. Especially will that be the case with regard to today's talk - that is to say, the stages of the path. So far, in dealing with the Buddha and the Dharma, we have concentrated more on the theory, more on the philosophy of Buddhism, more on the wisdom aspect. But from today we'll be dealing more with the practical, pragmatic side of the Buddha's teaching - and especially, as I've said, today, when we deal with the stages of the path.

Now it does occur to me that the stages of the path is so practical an aspect of the Buddha's teaching that one feels some hesitation in speaking about it. Buddhism, one may say, as a doctrine, a philosophy, is comparatively - and I say only comparatively - easy to understand. But even the simplest, even the most elementary doctrine or teaching is very very difficult indeed to put into practice. We all know this very well. We all know that we come along, week by week, month by month. We learn a very great deal. Some of us study at home too, read many books about Buddhism. But we manage to put into practice very very little indeed.

And that is because whereas understanding in the sense of theoretical or intellectual understanding, is so easy comparatively, the practice is so difficult. And this puts me in mind of an incident from the history of Zen Buddhism. When one mentions, of course, the name Zen, at

once people wake up, even on a warm summer's afternoon. This isn't exactly from the history of Zen as such, though it does concern the great founder of Ch'an, which afterwards became Zen, in China: that is to say, Bodhidharma, the last of the Indian patriarchs of the Zen school, the founding father of Ch'an or Zen in China.

When Bodhidharma came first to China his reputation seems to have preceded him, because in those days great Indian scholars, great Indian sages, were going every now and then from India, the motherland of Buddhism, to China, where Buddhism was just beginning to take root. And people were very interested to meet them, to learn something about Buddhism from them. And in those days it seems the then Emperor of China was quite an ardent Buddhist, though in rather a conventional sense - that is to say he built and endowed monasteries, he allowed monks to be ordained (because in those days imperial permission was necessary if one wanted to enter the Order, if one wanted to enter the Sangha), and he did all sorts of other things of this sort.

So when he came to hear, when he came to learn, that Bodhidharma, the great Indian sage, had just arrived in China, had just disembarked, he was very eager to meet him, very eager to have a talk with him. So before very long Bodhidharma received an invitation, before very long he was ushered into the palace, and into the Emperor's presence. And the Emperor apparently wasted no time in getting to the point. He had apparently a rather academic sort of mind, he was well trained in Buddhist philosophy, and he said to Bodhidharma, 'Tell me in just a few words what is the fundamental principle of Buddhism, upon which everything else is based, from which everything else follows.'

So Bodhidharma said very calmly, very quietly, 'It's quite simple.' And he recited a little Pali gatha (a gatha means a verse): 'sabbapapasa akaranam kusalasa upasampada sacitta pariyodapanam etam buddhana sasanam', which means 'Abstention from all evil, the doing of good, purification of the heart - this is the teaching of the Buddha.'

So when the Emperor heard this he was very very disappointed. He said to Bodhidharma 'Is this all?' And Bodhidharma very matter-of-factly replied, 'Yes, your majesty, that is all.' But the Emperor just couldn't believe this. He said, 'Are you sure? Is this all? Simply ceasing to do evil, learning to do good, purifying your heart - is there no more to it than that?' So Bodhidharma said 'There's really no more to it than that.' So the Emperor, who was a very learned man, and had expected apparently some very abstruse disquisition on Buddhist philosophy, said, 'But even a child of three years can understand what you have said.' So Bodhidharma said, 'True. Even a child of three can understand what I have said. But even an old man of eighty like you cannot put it into practice.'

And that's the difference. That is the degree of incommensurability, as it were, between the theory of Buddhism and the practice of Buddhism. The practice is an entirely different matter. And most students of Buddhism, especially in Western countries, we must admit are rather like the Emperor. When they're confronted with something to put into practice, something apparently simple, they say 'Is that all?' They want a long, learned, elaborate lecture on this and that, which they can really get their teeth into intellectually, discuss with their friends, and so on. As one of my Buddhist friends once wrote to me about some Buddhist gatherings, he described them as the witty word among the teacups. And that's very often just about what it is.

Sometimes, when I think over these things, I'm almost tempted to think that it might be rather a good thing if, in our Buddhist movement in this country, perhaps especially at this vihara, we stopped lectures altogether, or, if we to have one, say, once a year; and give another lecture only when people had not only understood but been able to put into practice the teaching of the first one. Because what is the use, as it were, of going on and on, deeper and deeper, intellectually, whereas your practice lags very very far behind.

That, after all, was the ancient Indian system of teaching, as you probably know. If you turn back not only to the Buddhist scriptures, not only to the Zen tradition, if you go even earlier than the Buddha, if you go back to the days, say, of the Upanishads, there's a very well-known Upanishad, it's one of the ten principal Upanishads, called the Chandogya. And there's a rather interesting

anecdote in it. Apparently - and of course it's couched rather in terms of mythology, but one must not mind that - apparently, the story goes in the Upanishad, the gods and the demons, that is to say the asuras in the sense of anti-gods, they'd heard from somewhere or other about the true self, the atman, and they wanted to learn about it. Because they'd heard that whosoever realized the true self obtained the satisfaction of all his desires.

So the gods deputed one of their number, that's to say Indra; the demons deputed one of their number, that is to say Virochana, to visit the teacher Prajapati and learn from him, if possible, about the true self. So the Upanishad says, in just one short simple sentence, 'They lived with him as his pupils for 32 years.' Now that doesn't mean that they were having lectures and classes and interviews every day. No, it means that they lived with him doing, as it were, the housework: going and gathering fuel for the fire, especially for the sacred fire; sweeping the compound, clearing away the dead leaves; doing errands, perhaps, for the teacher's wife. Because in preBuddhistic days, of course, gurus were married brahmin gurus, and their wives used to make use of the gurus' disciples in this way, for little errands and little odd jobs.

So they spent 32 years like this, without receiving a word of teaching. Then Prajapati, at the end of the 32 years, just calmly enquired one day, 'How is it, for what reason is it, that you've lived with me for so long?' You see, look at the difference - how patient they were in those days. Thirty-two years simply serving in the house of the teacher. Nowadays if someone comes to see you and you keep them waiting even five minutes, they get a little bit disgruntled; or if they can't see you exactly when they want to this week, and perhaps even next week, they wonder what is the matter. But in those days they were prepared to wait 32 years.

So when at the end of this period Prajapati asked 'Why is it that you are living here with me? What is it that you want to know?' they said 'We want to learn about the true self.' So he didn't say very much. He didn't give them a long lecture - no, not even after 32 years. He said to his wife 'Bring a mirror.' His wife apparently had one. 'Bring a mirror.' So she brought it. So he asked the two disciples to look into the mirror. What did they see? - they of course saw their two faces. So he said, 'That's the true self.'

So in those days people had so much faith in the words of their teachers, they were quite satisfied just to know that the reflection which they saw in the mirror was their true self - so away they went, thinking the body is the true self. Off they went, quite satisfied. And Virochana, who went back among the demons, of course, he taught them this - that the body is the true self. But Indra, who went back among the gods, wasn't satisfied. He thought, 'Well, this is what the teacher has said, but it seems that there's something more. I'm not quite satisfied with this answer. The teacher said that the body is the true self, but the body gets old, the body dies. Does that mean that the true self gets old, dies? Surely that can't be so.'

So he decided to go back to the teacher. So he went back to Prajapati and he said 'Please give me a further teaching. I'm not quite satisfied with what you said before.' So Prajapati said 'All right - but wait another 32 years.' So he waited another 32 years, and then Prajapati gave him a higher teaching. We won't go into what that was now. Again he went away satisfied. But again he became dissatisfied, and again he went back. And he was asked to wait. In those days they lived very long lives. He was asked to wait another 32 years, which he did. And again he went away and again he came back, but this time he was asked to wait only five years. Then he got the final teaching, we are told, and he realized the true self.

So look at the patience, look at the immense period of time involved, and look at how little was said. The whole episode, the whole description, occupies about two pages in the Upanishad, not more than that. But you notice also that the disciple got his results. He realized the true self. So add 32 to 32 to 32 to five - well, even if some of us were to live as long as that, I wonder if after hearing all our lectures, and reading all our books, we will be able to say ever at the end of this time, 'Well, I've realized the true self, or I've realized Nirvana or the Dharmakaya or whatever else it is that we aim at realizing.'

And the difference is because in those days, in that ancient system, the theory and the practice

went hand in hand. Now of course the theory invariably very much outstrips the practice; and one might even go so far as to say that we don't even always get our theory itself quite right. Even that seems to go a little wrong. So it's with thoughts of this kind in mind that one sometimes hesitates to speak about the more practical side of Buddhism - because one knows that very few people are really going to take one at all seriously. They might understand, they might appreciate, but very very few are really going to try to get down to putting into practice, actually applying, what one has been trying to say, what one has been trying to explain. However, let us say that we shall try once more, make a fresh attempt at least for the sake of the completeness of our present series of talks. So let us come back to the stages of the path.

Now before we set our foot on the first of these stages, at least metaphorically of course, let us just recapitulate a little - recapitulate, that is to say, from some of our previous talks. Those who have come at all regularly, whether here or at the Buddhist Society, will have come to understand by this time that from a more philosophical, from a more metaphysical point of view, the fundamental principle of Buddhism, the one enunciated by the Buddha immediately after his Enlightenment, as the first expression in conceptual terms of that Enlightenment, is the Law, or the Truth or Reality, if you like, of universal conditionality: the truth that whatsoever there is in the universe, on whatsoever level, whether material or mental, psychic or spiritual, whatsoever arises, whatsoever comes into existence, does so in dependence upon certain conditions, and ceases when those conditions are no longer operative.

We haven't time this afternoon to go into that in detail, but what we are concerned with more specifically is the fact that there are two great forms of that law of conditionality. That is to say, the law of conditionality functions in two particular ways, or that within the law of conditionality there are two particular traits of conditionality. One of those we call the cyclical, the other we call the progressive.

By the cyclical mode of conditionality - this is something which we've touched which we've touched upon many times before, so I'm not going into it in detail - by the cyclical mode of conditionality we mean a process of action and reaction between factors which are opposites, as when you get a process of action and reaction between happiness and unhappiness, or between depression and elation, or between birth and death and then rebirth, and so on.

And then by the progressive mode or type of conditionality we mean that type or trend of conditionality wherein one gets a process of action and reaction not from one opposite factor to its opposite, but from a factor to another factor which augments or increases the influence or the intensity of the previous one - as when we get a reaction say from pleasure to happiness, from happiness to rapture, rapture to bliss and so on. This is said to be an action and reaction in a progressive order rather than in a cyclical one. So there are these two trends of conditionality operating in the universe within the one great universal law of conditionality.

Now the first type or the first trend, the cyclical, action and reaction between factors which are opposites, which as it were alternately cancel each other out, is what we call in traditional Buddhist language the samsara, mundane existence itself, as depicted especially in the Tibetan Wheel of Life. Those of you who are familiar at all with Tibetan Buddhist art will have seen pictures of the Wheel of Life a number of times. I'm not going to describe it this afternoon; I've described it often.

We're particularly concerned this afternoon with the fourth, the outermost of the four circles into which the Wheel of Life is divided. The fourth circle, as you probably remember, is divided itself into twelve segments, and these twelve segments represent the twelve nidanas, or the twelve links in the chain, as it is called, of conditioned co-production, or dependent origination. These twelve links, these twelve nidanas, explain how the whole process of life, death and rebirth takes place; and they're therefore distributed, these twelve links or twelve nidanas, over three lives - that is to say the past life, the present life and the future life. There are two nidanas belonging to the past life, eight belonging to the present, and two belonging to the future.

And the nidanas themselves - again we're recapitulating, because this is ground we've often

covered, and which should be well-known by this time - the nidanas themselves, the twelve nidanas, are subdivided into cause process and result process. The two nidanas of the previous existence are what we call the cause process of the previous existence. Then the first five of the present existence are called the result process of the present existence. Then the sixth, seventh and eighth of the present existence are called the effect process of the present existence. And the last two are called the result process of the future existence. I know this sounds a little bit complicated; we ought to have a chart to illustrate it all. But those who have followed a number of lectures from the past will know what one is talking about.

Now the point which we're concerned with most of all here today is that nidana, or those two nidanas, we might say, which represent the weakest link of the chain. You know there's a saying that a chain is only as strong as the weakest link. So that's true of the nidana chain too. So where is the nidana chain weakest? Where can it be most easily broken? Paradoxically, one might say, here the weakest link is the strongest link. Now what does one mean by that? The last link, the last nidana, of the effect process of the present life is vedana or feeling. Then the first link of the cause process of the present life is trsna or craving. So the formula for these two links is 'In dependence upon feeling' - pleasurable feeling especially - 'there arises craving.'

And it's that which keeps the whole process going - the fact that we can't see things, we can't perceive things, in a purely mirror-like way, but that craving and aversion and bewilderment, mental confusion, also arise in connection with that feeling.

Now if we can break this, if we can break the chain at this point, if we can so experience feeling or vedana that no craving, no thirst, arises, then the wheel is broken. It doesn't revolve any more. One is not reborn, in Buddhist technical phraseology.

Now, as I've said, this is all recapitulation, so I'm skimming over the ground rather quickly, but one can say also that there are two methods, two ways, of breaking the chain at this weakest and strongest point. One is a sudden method and the other is a gradual one. The sudden method is of course illustrated by the story of the Buddha and Bahiya which I related not so very long ago and which I won't therefore relate again today. But to break the chain suddenly at this point is very difficult, so for most people a gradual method is preferable.

Now the gradual method is so-called not because it's slow but because it consists of a number of successive steps and stages. And the order of these steps, the order of these stages, is not arbitrary; it's based on a definite principle. And this principle upon which the successive steps and stages of the path - that is to say the spiritual path, the path leading to Nirvana or to Buddhahood or Enlightenment - are based is the second form of the law of conditionality - that is to say, that trend of conditionality which consists in reaction in a progressive order between factors that augment one another, the succeeding augmenting the effect of the preceding one, instead of reacting from it, as it were, in the opposite direction.

Now if the cyclical type of conditionality can be compared to the round, to a circle, then the progressive can be compared to a spiral. That's why sometimes in the past we've spoken of the spiral of the spiritual life, the spiral in which one gets a progressive reaction, as it were, from a certain factor to another factor which augments the effect of the preceding one.

Now this is important because all versions of the path, all versions of the spiritual path, the path leading to Nirvana or Enlightenment, are based upon this law, this progressive type of conditionality or this spiral. This may sound a little vague, a little abstract at present, but when we come to the concrete steps or stages you'll be able to see more clearly, more easily, how it all works out in actual practice. But it's very important to understand this before we go on to specific exemplifications of the path, either in the form of the Noble Eightfold Path or in the form of the sevenfold path of purification or the six paramitas, and so on.

Now the question arises: where does this spiral of the spiritual life, or where does the path begin? Well, the spiral, the path, begins just where the cycle begins, where the round of existence or the Wheel of Life begins. In other words it begins with our reaction to the last link of the result

process of the present life - that is, our reactions to vedana, or the feelings, pleasant, painful and neutral, which befall us in the course of our lives.

Now let's go into this a little more in detail. As we go through life, as you all know, we experience various kinds of feelings. Some are pleasant, some are painful, some are just neutral, neither pleasant nor painful. Now what is our usual reaction? Just stop and think. Suppose we experience something which is pleasant. What is our usual reaction, even without thinking? We want to grasp that pleasant experience. We want to prolong it. We want it to continue. We want to hold onto it as long as possible. That's our usual reaction: anything pleasant, we want to do it again, want to have it again. Supposing say last year you went away for a summer holiday. Suppose you went to some particular seaside resort. You had a very pleasant time there, a very enjoyable time. So this year, as soon as you start thinking about summer holidays, what do you think? What's your first thought? 'Well, suppose I went again this year to that place.' You want to repeat that pleasurable experience. You don't want to go somewhere fresh, somewhere new.

So this is our usual reaction to a favourite dish or to a favourite place or a favourite person. Whatever gives us pleasure, we tend to want to cling onto that, to hold onto it. That's our normal reaction. And when the experience is painful, of course, what do we do? We try to escape from that painful experience into something pleasant. So in this way we go just oscillating. We can't cling onto any pleasant experience forever. It's invariably interrupted; and in that way pain arises. So we oscillate between pleasure and pain, pain and pleasure. And in this way the Wheel of Life continues to revolve.

But suppose, Buddhism says, suppose we adopt a different attitude. Suppose we take a more objective view. Suppose we look out over the whole of conditioned existence, as we call it. Suppose we look out over our whole lives, all human life, all that we've ever thought or known, we see, if we have sufficient experience, if we're sufficiently thoughtful, that the whole of it, basically, fundamentally, is unsatisfactory. It's not that there are not pleasant experiences. It's not that there are things we don't enjoy. But there's nothing we find deeply and permanently satisfactory, however happy we may appear to be.

Usually we think that people who have all material comforts are happy, but I know from my own experience in the course of my contact with so many people, it's very amazing how many people you come into contact with whom you think are happy, you think are satisfied with life, but when you get to know them it isn't like that at all. I know in the course of my own work not only in this country, in India too, there might be somebody, you think how happy they are. They've got plenty of money, got a satisfactory family life apparently, there's nothing that they really need, no illness, no bereavement, nothing of that sort.

But one day they come to you and they say, dropping the mask just for once, they say 'I can't stand it any longer. I'm thoroughly fed up, thoroughly miserable.' And then they started telling you a long tale of woe. This has happened, that has happened. And you see that their so-called happy life was just a facade which they put up to hide all the misery behind. And one finds this so very very often. I'm sure many doctors know this, many lawyers know this, and many other professional people.

But when you see people just superficially, just from time to time, and they smile at you, everything seems to be all right. They're well dressed. As far as you can see there seems to be nothing wrong. They don't look starving. They look as though they had a good meal recently. So you think everything's all right. But very often it isn't like that; almost always it isn't like that. They might seem plump and satisfied, smiling, but that's only a mask, as it were, and underneath it all they're deeply, fundamentally dissatisfied. They aren't really satisfied with anything they've encountered. They're still looking, they're still basically deeply, one might say, even frustrated.

So it's people of this sort who start taking an interest in what we conventionally call, though it's a rather unfortunate term nowadays, almost a dirty word, religion. Or we might say that these are the people who start seeking after spiritual things. They start thinking, 'Well, I haven't found happiness in my work, in my job. That's just a chore. I'd like to give it up. I haven't found any real

happiness, say in my family life.' A man might say 'Yes, my wife is decent enough, but ...' Or he might say, well, I haven't found any real satisfaction in my hobby, not even in my garden, not even in my roses and so on, not even at my club or the sports I'm interested in with my friends - no real happiness, no real satisfaction. So perhaps true happiness, true satisfaction, is to be found somewhere else, in the region of what is vaguely called the spiritual.

So at first a sort of vague confused searching and striving. Perhaps at first a person doesn't know what he's looking for, or what she's looking for. Perhaps almost by accident they latch onto something, follow it up and find that it's leading them, perhaps, in a direction that they really deep down wanted to go. But as time goes on, as they latch on, as it were, to more and more clues - they might read a book, might even see a film, might meet someone - it almost seems as though a pattern is starting to weave itself. It's as though they'll be starting to come in touch with something which is becoming more and more tangible, so that they get a certain awareness of a different dimension that they weren't aware of before. And they start developing a sort of intuitive feeling that there is something there, something behind the veil, as it were, something that they were blind to before, that they weren't sensitive to before. They start developing a stronger and stronger feeling of and for and towards this.

Now all this is very vague and very confused at first, but eventually it sort of sorts itself out. It develops, it clarifies, it becomes stronger, clearer. And it develops eventually into what in Buddhism we call faith in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha: the Buddha representing the ideal of Enlightenment, the Dharma representing the path leading to that state, and the Sangha, the spiritual community of those treading the path.

Now faith, this English word translates the Pali saddha and Sanskrit sraddha, which can be translated also as confidence, also as devotion, or the whole emotional, feeling side of the spiritual life, this is the wholesome, that is to say the ethically wholesome, counterpart of trsna, craving or thirst. In dependence upon vedana, feeling, in this case of the unsatisfactoriness of the world, there arises not thirst, not craving, but faith - faith in something above, beyond, the world, higher than the world.

Now the word sraddha in Sanskrit comes from a verb which means 'to place the heart on'. So sraddha, in the Buddhistic sense, putting aside all the connotations of faith in English, means the placing of the heart, the orientation, as it were, of one's emotional life, the placing of the heart on the Unconditioned, the Absolute if you like, rather than on the conditioned. So in this way it said, 'In dependence upon dukkha, in dependence upon one's experience of the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned existence, of one's ordinary life, there arises saddha, confidence or faith, in the sense of sensitivity to, if you like even belief in, awareness of, a whole higher dimension of truth and reality - that is to say, the spiritual.

In other words, when, in dependence upon one's experience or one's feeling there arises not thirst or craving for the perpetuation of the pleasant side of feeling, but faith or confidence in this sense, one has reacted not in a cyclical order, but one has reacted in a progressive order. And the spiral of the spiritual life has begun to unwind. So therefore one has come to the first stage of the path, the stage of faith. In dependence upon dukkha, suffering or unsatisfactoriness, there arises not trsna, not craving, but faith, in the sense of that sensitivity to a whole new world of higher spiritual values.

Now as a result of this experience, as a result of the arising of that sraddha or faith, that sensitivity to higher values, one starts practising two virtues which in Buddhism are called dana and sila. Dana simply means giving or generosity. Craving already has become weakened, because in dependence upon feeling there has arisen not craving but faith. So craving has become weakened. One's hold on material things as it were slackens. One becomes more generous, and one practises the virtue of dana. And also one practises sila or ethics, or if you like the moral life, because one's hold on the things of this world becomes looser. One practises especially at this stage the five precepts, as we call them in Buddhism: not taking life, not taking what is not given, abstention from sexual misconduct, use of right speech, and abstention from intoxicating or stupefying drinks and drugs.

So as a result of this practice, as a result of giving, as a result of an ethical life, and as a result especially of this arising of faith in the sense of sensitivity to these higher spiritual values, one feels light, one feels happy, and one feels contented. One feels that there's now some definite aim in one's life. Before one was just swept along aimlessly; 'driven', perhaps, would be a better word, aimlessly, in pursuit of this and that. One didn't really know what the aim of one's life was. If you ask a person usually, 'Well, what's your aim in life?', if he's still at school or at college he'll say, 'To pass, to qualify, to get a job, to marry.' But if you meet him after that and say 'What's your aim in life?' they might say 'Well, to get a bit of promotion, I suppose, to retire on a good pension.' But if you meet him after that and you say 'What's the aim of your life?' he'll say, 'Well, I think my life's ended now, it's finished, there can't be any question of an aim.'

So that's the usual way things are. But when in dependence upon one's experience of life, especially one's experience of the unsatisfactory side of it, there arises faith in the Buddhist sense, sensitivity to something above and beyond, then one has a definite aim in life - that is, to get further in that same direction. Spiritual contact has been made. Of course it isn't all smooth sailing. One often finds that one is diverted, one is deflected. Faith may arise but it may also subside, so the pendulum keeps on swinging.

In the case of some people it swings quite violently. You may see them sometimes coming to lectures, meetings, classes, tremendously interested in Buddhism. Then they disappear for a while. Then after a few months you see them again. They come back rather shyly, rather hesitantly, sit at the back. You may perhaps have a talk with them one day, and you may say 'What happened to you all those months? You seemed so keen, so interested. You were one of the most regular people - then you disappeared.' So they may say, 'Oh, I was busy' - just like that, with a hangdog sort of expression. Or if they're honest they may give a rather shamefaced smile and they may say, 'Well, I'm afraid that for a few months I was just living it up.' And you can just understand from that what has happened. But they come back. The pendulum swings, but as time goes by it swings less and less violently, and it comes eventually to rest in the centre.

So in this way we find, in dependence upon our experience of the unsatisfactoriness of life, there arises faith. And when out of faith we start practising dana or giving and leading a moral life, practising the five precepts, we find that we experience peace and contentment, or what we call in Buddhism technically satisfaction and delight. Then we say 'in dependence upon saddha, upon faith, there arises pamojja.' This means a sort of tranquillity, a sort of feeling of being at peace with oneself; or we may translate it more approximately 'satisfaction and delight'.

So these are the first three steps or the first three stages: in dependence upon ...

So piti is technically classified as being of five different kinds. There's a 'lesser thrill', as it's called. The lesser thrill of rapture is of the sort which makes the hairs of the body stand on end, as when you're very moved by something. Then the momentary rapture, as it's called, the momentary piti, is that which comes just like a flash of lightning. It's so overwhelming that one can bear to experience it just for an instant. It sort of touches one, reduces one to ashes, as it were, then it's gone. You can't stand more of it than that - it just comes and goes. And then there's what's called the flooding rapture, the rapture which just sort of floods in upon you, and this is compared to the waves on the seashore, coming in and filling a cave on the seashore. In that way the rapture as it were floods in, especially when one is practising meditation, and one feels almost sort of carried away by it. Then there's what's called the all-pervading rapture, in which one feels just like a balloon, as it were, so light, so buoyant, almost, as it were, lifted up. And lastly there's what's called the transporting priti or transporting rapture, which is said actually to cause levitation.

Now I know I've mentioned this incident before, but I see that there are some who haven't been here before and might be interested by it. People often ask about levitation. It's a rather minor interest in Buddhism, but Buddhists do believe that it can take place, and they believe it takes place when the priti, the interest, enthusiasm, joy or rapture, even ecstasy, becomes so intense that the physical body is actually lifted up by them. And this happens especially in connection with some breathing exercises. And so I remember that not so many years ago I happened to be

passing through a place called Karikpur in India. Karikpur is a very big railway junction, and I'd gone there from Calcutta for a couple of hours to give a lecture. And the lecture was given at about eleven o'clock at night, that's the practice in those parts, they like to have good late lectures. And I was waiting for the one o'clock morning train to carry me back to Calcutta.

So I was waiting on this station platform, and there were about, I think, perhaps two hundred people there with me. And we just got talking, to pass the time until the train arrives. As so often happens in India, of course the train was late. So while I was there with these people they brought forward a certain individual, a very ordinary looking man in ordinary Indian dress, and they said 'This man has got a problem.' So I of course thought, well, maybe his wife has run away, or maybe his son hasn't passed an examination, or something of that sort. But they said, No. The trouble is that he levitates.' So I said 'Do you mean that he literally levitates?' So they said 'Yes. He's a Kabirapanti.' Kabirapanti means someone following the sect founded by Kabir, the great medieval Hindu cum Muslim yogi. So apparently every morning he was practising certain breathing exercises, and as a result of these breathing exercises he would just float up a few inches, a few feet, above the ground.

So I said to these people a little suspiciously, 'Has anyone seen this?' So they said, 'Oh yes, we've all seen it every day. So they said, 'This man just can't control it. He wants to meditate, but this levitation gets in the way. He'd like to stop it but he can't. As soon as he does his breathing exercises it just happens, he just starts going up into the air. So what should he do? How should he stop?' This is the sort of question one might be asked at any time in India.

So I said 'According to Buddhism levitation is brought about by excess of priti - that is, rapture, ecstasy. So what one must do is cultivate the mental faculty of equanimity or tranquillity, upeksa. If one does that, there'll be a sort of counterbalancing force to the priti, and levitation will not occur.

Now I never went back to Karikpur again, and I never have heard whether the treatment, or the prescription, was successful. But let us hope that it was. I'm reminded, incidentally, while we're on the subject, of another little story. I remember about ten years ago or maybe a little less, in Kalimpong, up in the Himalayas, I was entertaining to lunch an American couple - he afterwards wrote a book about his experiences called *The Razor's Edge* - and a Tibetan lama, rather a distinguished one - he was the head of the Pemayangtse monastery in Sikkim, and he was a friend of mine, a man of about forty-five who had arrived in the area fairly recently. So in the course of the lunch - and it's rather interesting that the lama himself didn't understand any English - in the course of the lunch the American said rather sceptically, and with rather a knowing sort of smile, said to the lama through the translator, 'I suppose you haven't heard of anyone who can levitate?'

So the lama said rather modestly 'Yes. In fact, I do a little myself.' So the two Americans nearly fell off their chairs. They said, 'You can do it yourself?' He said 'Yes. I don't think I could do it right now, but if I'm alone in the jungle, in a secluded monastery, if I spend about six months there meditating, I can do this at the end of that period.'

And I have met a number of Tibetans of this type, who've either seen it or who can practise it. So this is all said to be due in Buddhism to what we call priti, or excess of priti, or rapture, when the bliss or the rapture which one experiences, especially in meditation, becomes so intense that the body is quite literally lifted up. And one finds, of course, records of this sort of thing not only in Buddhist literature and Buddhist life, but even in the lives of some comparatively recent Christian mystics. But Buddhists would say this isn't a very important phenomenon or experience. We've only got to the fourth stage of the path - this is a mundane experience, essentially. If it occurs, one shouldn't bother about it, one shouldn't be particularly exhilarated about it. It just means that one has accumulated priti within one of sufficient intensity to produce this particular psycho-physical effect.

Now all these experiences of priti, whether the lesser thrill or the momentary rapture or the flooding rapture or the transporting rapture - these are all psychophysical. That is to say, they're

all experienced in the body, that's to say in the nervous system, as well as in the mind. They're not just mental; they're physical also, they're psycho-physical. The whole organism is involved.

Now what is this priti, what is this piti, this rapture or ecstasy? We can go into this a little also. We can say in modern language, in modern terminology, that the priti, the rapture, the ecstasy, comes about as a result of the release of energy due to resolution of what we would call nowadays complexes. That is, within one, there are sort of little blockages of energy - energy as it were short-circuiting itself, locked up. So in the course of one's religious life, in the course of one's spiritual life, especially when one practises meditation, these get resolved, especially through the practice of awareness. One digs down, as it were, one uncovers certain depths within oneself, and all these little complexes are resolved, these blockages are removed, and the energy locked up in them is released and this surges up. And it's due to this upsurge of energy within oneself, felt throughout the nervous system as well as in the mind, that one experiences priti, this psycho-physical rapture or energy.

So this is the process so far. These are the stages of the path so far. In dependence upon suffering arises faith. In dependence upon faith there arises satisfaction and delight. In dependence upon that satisfaction and delight, as it becomes more and more intense, there arises priti, the psycho-physical rapture and ecstasy of varying degrees.

Now next, in dependence upon the priti, in dependence upon the psycho-physical ecstasy, there arises what we called passadhi. Passadhi literally means calm, tranquillity, serenity; and this is a purely mental happiness, a purely mental state. In this state there's no consciousness of the physical body. What happens is that whereas the priti experience, the rapture or ecstasy experience, was psycho-physical, here there is a calming down of the physical side. The experience withdraws, as it were, from the body, from the nervous system. It becomes a purely mental one. So there's no experience of rapture or energy in the body, but only in the mind. So therefore we say that in dependence on the psycho-physical rapture or ecstasy there arises passadhi - calm or tranquillity or serenity - in which there's no consciousness of the physical body.

And then in dependence upon that there arises a purely mental, a purely spiritual, if you like, happiness, which we call sukha. Sukha has got various meanings in Buddhism. It means pleasant bodily feeling. It also means all pleasurable emotions, or happiness, either hedonic or spiritual. But here sukha means the feeling of intense happiness which wells up, as it were, within one when bodily awareness is transformed. Whereas, as it were, the experience of psycho-physical rapture or ecstasy is refined, the physical side is refined away, the nervous side, or nervous system side is refined away, and a purely mental or spiritual experience of bliss or happiness is left which wells up, as it were, of itself without any sort of physical or nervous repercussion.

So in this way we say that in dependence upon passadhi, in dependence upon that calm and tranquillity, consisting in the calming down of, the pacification of, the physical side, of the psycho-physical rapture, there arises sukha, a feeling or experience of pure spiritual happiness.

Now the characteristic of happiness is stability. If one is really happy one has got no desire to move on to something else. When you're happy in anything, if for instance you're perfectly happy sitting and talking with someone, you don't start thinking about going and starting talking to someone else. If you're perfectly happy with the house you've got, you don't start thinking of another house. And so on. So the characteristic of happiness is stability.

Most people, as you know, are not stable. And they're not stable because they're frustrated, because they're not happy, in a word. They're always wanting to move on to something else. They always want change, always want variety. Variety is the spice of life, as they say. Most people try to make it the salt of life, because they're not really happy. The characteristic of happiness is stability, as it were, satisfaction with what one has. If one is really happy with something one doesn't want to change it, one doesn't want to go on to something else. The mere fact that so often we want to go on to something else means that we are not happy.

So when one is happy, when one experiences true spiritual happiness, there's no desire to move on to something else. Now, if one hasn't experienced this, one really won't know what is being talked about, won't understand, because one's whole life is usually a process of moving on, or trying to move on, to something else, some other experience, because one isn't happy with the present experience.

But very very rarely it does come to one that one is completely happy with and therefore completely immersed in some experience - very rarely anything mundane, more usually something spiritual. So as I've said, there's no desire to move on to anything else, and that means that the mind naturally becomes one-pointed. When you're happy with something and in something, you become absorbed, more and more and more and more. In this way the whole mind, the whole being, one can say, becomes concentrated, one-pointed - out of one's experience of happiness.

And therefore it is said, going on to the next stage of the path, that in dependence upon sukha, in dependence upon one's experience of purely spiritual happiness, there arises samadhi. Now this is very significant. Samadhi is usually translated, of course, as meditation, but that doesn't help us very much. But it's very significant that samadhi or concentration, to translate it provisionally, arises in dependence upon sukha. It's very significant indeed. It means that there's no true concentration, no true meditation therefore, without happiness. If you're not a happy person, or if you aren't even experiencing happiness, you can't concentrate, you can't meditate.

Now most people think of concentration in a quite different way. They think that concentration is something to be gained by force of will. 'Here am I. Now is my meditation hour. My mind is buzzing, full of idle thoughts. There's the traffic going up and down outside. I'm sure there's going to be a knock on the door. But I am going to concentrate. I don't particularly want to, but I've made up my mind I will. I'm going to force my mind, fix it on that object, and I'm going to do that with the help of an exercise. I've got a little technique of concentration, a little concentration exercise, and I'm going to do that. With the help of that I'll fix my mind. And that's my concentration, that's my meditation.'

And most people think in this way, quite literally. But one can say that meditation is not just a question of the application of techniques, not even the right techniques. Meditation is much more a matter of gradual growth. That is, in dependence on our experience of suffering in life arises faith. In dependence on our experience of faith there arises satisfaction and delight. In dependence upon that there arises interest, enthusiasm, rapture, ecstasy. In dependence on that, calm and tranquillity, in dependence upon that, purely spiritual happiness; and then, in dependence upon that, growing out of it quite naturally, easily, spontaneously, as it were, there arises samadhi concentration and meditation.

If the concentration, if the meditation, doesn't grow in this natural spontaneous sort of way, we insist on making it a business of forcible fixation of the mind on an object, there's a great danger of reaction from the unregenerate or unsublimated portions of our psyche. We may manage through force of will to deliberately, consciously, hold the mind on certain objects - it may be the breath, it may be a little red disc, it may be anything. It may be a Buddha image, it may be a mantra. We may succeed in holding the mind onto that for a certain time, but we've done that with the energy of the conscious mind. The unconscious mind isn't co-operating, and sooner or later there's a reaction. There might even be a sort of breakdown.

Now this doesn't mean that exercises are not useful, doesn't mean that concentration exercises are not useful. They are: they're very useful. But they play very definitely a secondary role. And they're much more effective when the ground has been cleared. In the case of most people what happens? No real understanding, no real appreciation of the unsatisfactoriness of life. They think life is a good enough sort of thing; they enjoy it, just like other people. But they've become intellectually convinced about Buddhism, they think, so they class, they classify themselves as Buddhists. So no real experience, in the sense of no understanding of the unsatisfactoriness of existence, therefore no real faith - they're all intellect, mostly - therefore no giving, no moral life, very often; therefore no satisfaction and delight; therefore no experience of priti; therefore no

experience of calm, tranquillity, and therefore no experience of spiritual happiness, and therefore, of course, no real concentration.

That applies to most people. But without all those things, without the faith, without the rapture, without the calm, without the spiritual happiness, they just try, by means of an effort of will, to concentrate and to meditate. But that isn't possible. But if one does do these things, if one builds up the faith and so on, then when one does come to concentrate, when one makes use of a meditation technique, then it's much more quickly and much more easily effective.

There are occasions, for instance, as we know, of the Buddha's own disciples. We read in the scriptures so many times that monk so-and-so went along to the Buddha. The Buddha said a few words and the monk became Enlightened - sometimes the lay person became Enlightened. So why was that? Partly at least because the ground was prepared. The Buddha's words fell on prepared ground. Sometimes it might happen that a monk who was living in the forest would see a leaf fall from the tree, and from that he'd gain an intense realization of impermanence. And from that intense realization of impermanence he would get almost immediately Enlightened, because of the intensity of that realization. In all these cases the ground had been prepared.

But in our case mostly the ground hasn't been prepared. It's full of rocks and stones and weeds and garbage - old tin trunks and baths and things like that. The seeds, even if a few of them are scattered there haphazardly, just can't spring up, what to speak of the absence of rain and so on. So the ground must have been prepared. There must have been faith. There must have been satisfaction, delight, rapture and so on, all there before the technique of concentration employed can be really helpful and really fruitful. But when that does take place then in dependence on that experience of spiritual happiness there arises samadhi, concentration, or meditation.

Now there are three levels of samadhi. There's the prefatory level, when the mind is fixed on the gross object, like the process of respiration or the Buddha image, or when the mantra is repeated audibly. Then there's an intermediate stage, with a subtle, often luminous counterpart of the original gross object or image. And then there's the stage of full samadhi, apana samadhi, when the mind becomes fully absorbed in the subtle counterpart of the original concentration object.

Now full samadhi is divided again into samadhi with form, samadhi without form. Each of those is subdivided into four levels or four grades - we won't go into that now. We can only say that they represent increasingly subtle states or stages of the samadhi experience, the experience of concentration and meditation.

Now up to this point, even up to this point of samadhi, concentration and meditation, we're still in mundane levels, we're still really within the round. It's rather as though the round had been stretched out like an elastic band into a point, but it can snap back. We're on the spiral but we're still subject to what I sometimes call a gravitational pull from the round. But from now onwards, with the arising of the next nidana in this series, we come to the second part of the spiral, which is purely transcendental, and from which there is no possibility of regression.

Now there's a very important saying of the Buddha found in the scriptures. He says, 'The concentrated mind' - that is, the mind of samadhi - 'sees things as they really are.' When the mind isn't calm, when the mind isn't still, when there are too many thoughts, when it isn't harmonized, it isn't balanced, it's all sort of twisted and distorted and perverted, and it can't see things as they really are. It's only the concentrated mind which sees things as they are - not the mind which is straining itself to keep onto an object of concentration, but the mind which is naturally calm, naturally concentrated, with or without the help of a concentration exercise.

An illustration of course which is given is that when the water is still, when the waters of a lake or a pond are still, without waves, they can reflect the face of the moon without distortion. But when the wind blows, when there are lots of tiny ripples, even great waves, the reflection of the moon is broken up, distorted - you get it all in bits and pieces, as it were. So we see things like that, all in bits and pieces, broken up, twisted. It's only the concentrated mind which sees things as they are, which sees the full moon, full and perfect and round. And therefore next we come

to the stage where it is said that in dependence upon samadhi, in dependence on our experience of these higher states or stages of consciousness, called states of concentration or meditation, there arises yathabhutanadassana, which means 'knowledge and vision of things as they really are'.

To begin with we see conditioned things as they really are. We see them as unsatisfactory, we see them as transitory, we see them as insubstantial, devoid of any real selfhood, any reality. When one sees them like that, of course, as we described at length in our talk in the texture of reality, one becomes no longer attached to them. One as it were withdraws from them. And when you deeply see, when you really realize, on the basis of your experience of samadhi, that conditioned things, all the things that you normally come into contact with, are unsatisfactory, that they're going to pass away anyway, and that there's no real truth or reality in them, you become less and less attached to them. In fact, you withdraw from them, you lose interest.

So therefore it is said that in dependence upon yathabhutanadassana, or in dependence upon knowledge and vision of things as they are, especially of conditioned existence as it is, there arises nibbida or disgust or revulsion or turning away from. Now this isn't just a psychological reaction, because at this level you're far above and beyond any psychology in the ordinary sense, because you're above and beyond the psyche, the mind, in any ordinary sense. It's a purely spiritual withdrawal - calm, deliberate, as it were, natural.

The Pali texts give a very interesting example. They say 'Suppose there's a fisherman - in India fishermen sometimes catch fish in their hands. They just poise themselves on a little bank at the edge of the ricefields, which are flooded of course and where there are fish amongst the rice plants, just poise themselves there, just lower their hands, and the fish will be there sort of down in the mud almost, feeling the warmth which is percolating through the water, and suddenly of course the hands of the fishermen grasp. But it sometimes happens that when he brings it up the fisherman sees it isn't a fish at all, it's a poisonous snake. So what does he do then? He just drops it.

So the Buddhist texts say it's just like that with conditioned things. We grasp hold of them, we grab hold of them, just like the fisherman seeing on the so-called fish or what he thought was a fish the three marks which show that it's a poisonous snake. So when we see on all these mundane things, these conditioned things which we've grasped, the three marks of unsatisfactoriness, transitoriness, insubstantiality, we just let go.

So this link or this stage of nibbida, disgust or revulsion, can also be interpreted just as letting go, when you see that things just aren't worth having, not really worth grasping hold of. So one is no longer affected by conditioned things. If they come, well, they come. If they go, well, they go. There's a rather interesting story about a modern Indian swamiji, that's a Hindu monk. Apparently someone was with him once, sitting and talking, and a man came in, an Indian, saluted him very reverentially, and placed a beautiful new blanket in front of him. So the swamiji didn't say anything, the man just went away, this man went on talking with the swamiji. Then after a while a second man came in, sat down, looked at the blanket, got up and took it away.

So the visitor couldn't restrain his curiosity, to see this little pantomime. One man brings a beautiful new blanket, puts it down in front of the swamiji, and goes away. Then someone else comes in, sits down, then gets up, takes the blanket away. What is all this? So he asked the swamiji what happened. So the swamiji said, 'Well, I don't really know.' So the visitor said, 'Well, that man brought you the blanket.' He said, 'Yes, I suppose he brought it as a present.' Then the man said, 'What about the second man who took it away?' The swamiji said, 'Yes, I suppose he stole it. One man brought it, another man took it away - what is that to do with me?'

So this should as it were be the attitude - things come and they go. So the swamiji's heart wasn't set on that blanket. When the first man brought it he didn't think 'Oh, what a beautiful new blanket. It's going to keep me very warm at night. It'll be very comfortable.' He didn't get attached to it, didn't fasten his mind on it, so he didn't regard it as his. So when the second man came and took it away, it just didn't bother him at all. That was that. It came and it went.

So this is the sort of experience, this is the sort of feeling one gets through nibbida. After one has seen things as they really are, one is no longer affected by conditioned things. One enjoys a state of unruffled tranquillity. There's no stirring of passion. So because of this it is said that in dependence upon that disgust or revulsion or letting go there arises what we call viraga or dispassion. One could very well translate it just as peace of mind - not in the ordinary sense, but in a quite transcendental sense, peace of mind - something which most people just don't know, can't even form any conception of.

And then in dependence upon that - we're going a little more quickly now because we're coming to the end of the path, and these five stages don't concern us so much - in dependence upon that viraga or dispassion there arises vimutti, which means emancipation or freedom, spiritual freedom, freedom from all conditionedness, all conditionings of one's own mind, all limitations or prejudices or perversions. And it's about this vimutti that the Buddha says in a very important passage in the suttas, 'Just as the great ocean has one taste - that is to say, the taste of salt - you may take water from the oceans of the West or of the East, the North or the South, but they all taste salt - in the same way, he said, my teaching also has one taste. You sample it wheresoever you like, whatsoever teaching. And that one taste is the taste of freedom, mental and spiritual and transcendental freedom. That's the goal, as it were the characteristic taste of my teaching.

We haven't quite reached the end. In dependence upon freedom, vimutti, there arises assavakayajñana, the knowledge, the awareness, that the asravas, the defilements, of kama, that is to say desire for sensuous experience, bhava, desire for any sort of conditioned existence whatsoever, and avijja, all spiritual ignorance, have been completely destroyed. In other words thirst or craving, or trsna, which is the emotional counterpart, the concomitant of that spiritual ignorance, has been destroyed. You've broken the chain, at its weakest and its strongest link. In dependence upon vedana, feeling, there no longer arises any trsna, any craving whatsoever. You've filed it away to nothing through your following of the path, the spiral, up these successive steps, up these successive stages. So you've wound all the way up now into Nirvana, into Enlightenment, into Buddhahood. So these are the steps, these are the stages of the path, all based on this great principle of conditionality, especially in its second form, that of the spiral, or that of the progressive order of action and reaction, as between factors which progressively augment one another, the succeeding augmenting the effect of the previous one.

Now, to bring this a little down to earth, it means that when any experience befalls us, whether someone says something to us, or we read something, or we feel something, experience something through the senses, we must always be aware, and we must ask ourselves in which direction is the reaction going. Is it a cyclical reaction, or is it a progressive one? Is it the spiral? Because if there's a cyclical reaction - say from pleasure to greed, craving, then we go round and round in the Wheel of Life. If there's a progressive one, a cyclical one, however faint, however feeble - say a reaction from experience of the unsatisfactoriness of life to a feeling after, an aspiration after something higher, then to that extent we go up the spiral, we place our foot, however hesitantly, upon the first step, the first stage of the path.

So this, you'll surely agree I think, is a very very practical aspect of Buddhism indeed. How many people will care to place their foot even upon the first step, even upon the first stage, I don't know. But we have, each and every one of us, sincerely and honestly to investigate, to introspect our own minds, to try to understand just where we are now, in which direction we are going, and what the ultimate goal of all our activities, indeed of our lives, really is. If we see things clearly, if we get the stages of the path, if we get the goal of those stages clearly in view, there is no doubt what our decision, and we hope also what our determination eventually will be.