

Lecture 34: The Stages of the Spiritual Path

Friends, if we look at Buddhism in a very general way, we see that it can be looked at from a number of different points of view, and especially I think that we can say that we can look at it principally from two points of view. We can look at it from a more theoretical point of view, a point of view which is more philosophical, if you like even speculative, and we can also look at it from a point of view which is more practical, even pragmatic.

Now this evening we are going to be concerned, in fact we are going to be very much concerned, with the practical aspect of Buddhism. For the time being we are going to leave aside the philosophy, leave aside the theory, and we are going to concern ourselves with that which is pre-eminently practical; we are going to try to understand this evening something at least of the stages of the spiritual path. And after all, hardly anything from a Buddhist point of view could be more practical than that.

But before we start on the path itself, just a few words, a few more general words of explanation. What we call Buddhism, but what in the East is more generally known as the Dharma, the Truth, or the Teaching, or even the Doctrine, was founded, as we saw yesterday and also the day before yesterday, was founded by Gautama the Buddha. And as we saw in the first of our lectures of this retreat, the name, or rather the title Buddha, means simply, 'The One who knows', or, as we more usually translate it or more usually render it, it means 'the Awakened', or 'the Enlightened One', and the state of Buddhahood or the state of Enlightenment may be described as a state of absolute moral and spiritual perfection.

It is also, as Buddhism emphasises most strongly, a state which is within the reach of each and every individual human being. If Buddhism emphasises anything, it emphasises that each of us, if we only make the effort, can become, as the Buddha himself became, one who knows, one who is enlightened, one who is awake. And this is the great hope, this is in fact the glorious prospect, that Buddhism holds out to each and every human being, that they too can become Buddhas, that they too can become enlightened or awake. And what we call Buddhism is not just a religion, not just a religious teaching, but it is primarily the path on the way to this attainment, to this attainment of Buddhahood or Enlightenment or Nirvana, or whatever else we may choose to call it. And what we describe as the stages of the spiritual path or what Buddhism describes as the stages of the ? are simply the successive stages, if you like, accumulative stages, in our progress to that state of enlightenment.

Now these stages are laid down, these stages are demarcated, not in accordance with any purely objective or external criterion. These stages are psychological, they are dictated, as it were, by the very nature, by the very structure, of our own experience, our own spiritual experience, and they represent, the stages of the spiritual path, represent, we may say, a certain sequence of experience, one experience arising, then, in dependence upon another, just as out of the bud grows the flower, out of the flower the fruit, so, in the same way, out of one spiritual experience there grows or there blossoms another, out of that yet another, out of that another still, and with the twelve factors and eleven stages of the spiritual path each succeeding one higher, more refined, more beautiful, a little nearer, we may say, to Nirvana. So the whole series, the whole sequence of stages, of the states, is progressive and is cumulative.

Now this evening, we are going to deal, somewhat briefly, with twelve stages, twelve stages of the spiritual path, each stage arising in dependence upon, or conditioned by, the proceeding stage. There are other formulations of the path: there are other enumerations of the stages of the Spiritual Path. We hear, for instance, as you know very well, of the Noble Eightfold Path, with its eight stages, or eight aspects. We also hear of the threefold path of Ethics, Meditation and Wisdom. We hear of the Path of the Paramitas, the Perfections to be practised by the Bodhisattva, either six or ten in number. But this evening we are concerned with the twelve successive stages, or twelve successive steps of the Spiritual Path, because this particular formulation exhibits more clearly perhaps than any other formulation, the nature of the Spiritual Path itself.

So we shall take up these stages one by one and try to understand what they all represent. We may say by way of introduction, we may say that each of these stages as enumerated in the scriptures represents an experience, a spiritual experience in process of transition to an experience more advanced still. It's as though, it is suggested, it's as though it's put to us that the experience is not something fixed and static, it's not really like a step in a staircase or on a ladder: it's all the time in process of developing into, growing into, something greater than itself. We speak of the spiritual path, but we mustn't be misled by metaphors. It isn't that the spiritual path is something fixed and rigid, and we just go up it - we move but the path remains stationary - it isn't like that. The path itself flows, we may say, the path itself grows, just like a plant grows, just like a flower grows, and one stage passes over into the next, so there's a constant upward movement, a movement of ascension. And this we shall see made clear in the very formulae with which the stages of the path are described; and if we traverse these stages, if we try to understand these experiences, which are continually merging into higher experiences still, then we shall find that we have, as it were, or that we've arrived at what we may describe as a sort of progressive phenomenology of the spirit.

Now the first stage of the spiritual path is described in the texts in the following formula: the formula says: dependent upon suffering arises faith. This is where the spiritual path begins: dependent upon suffering arises faith. So here we have two experiences: we have an experience of suffering and we have another experience which is called the experience of faith. And we are further told by this formulation that the former experience, suffering, gives rise to the latter, that is to say, gives rise to faith.

Now what does this mean? How does this come about? What in any case is meant by suffering? By suffering is meant here not just individual painful experiences, when you have say toothache, or when you cut your finger, or when someone disappoints you very bitterly. These are painful experiences, but it isn't just experiences of this kind that the text means when it speaks of faith arising out of suffering. By suffering here is meant, rather, unsatisfactoriness, the original word is *duhkha*, and I sometimes point out that one of the traditional explanations of the word *duhkha*, which we usually translate as suffering, is this: the prefix 'du' means 'ill', or bad; or 'incorrect' or 'improper', and the suffix 'kha' is the same word or part of a word that we find in the word 'cakra' which means 'wheel'. So 'duhkha' is sometimes traditionally explained - this may not be etymologically correct in the scientific sense - which throws a great deal of light on the Buddhistic meaning of the term - it's very often described as being originated from a chariot wheel which fits badly - du kha - the ill-fitting chariot wheel.

Now if you have an ill-fitting chariot wheel and you are driving along, even galloping along in that chariot, then what happens? You have a very bumpy journey, a very uncomfortable journey - there were no springs on chariots in ancient India. So, if you were so unfortunate as to be driving along - and in any case there were no proper roads - driving along in a chariot, the wheel of which was ill-fitting, loose, wobbly, then you had a very rough, and a very rocky journey, a very uncomfortable journey.

So *duhkha*, unsatisfactoriness, which we usually translate as suffering, means the sort of discomfort which arises in the course of our lives when things don't fit properly, when they don't work together properly, when there's a lot of jarring, when there's a lot of discomfort arising out of that jarring sensation. So this is really what is meant by *duhkha*. In other words it means a sort of disharmony that we experience, the jarring quality that we experience in the course of our everyday life in this world. And we all know what this sort of thing means.

We all know that things are never altogether 100 per cent right. There's always something, even if it's only a little something, that goes wrong. Even in the course of the most beautiful day, it seems, only too often, a cloud has to float across the face of the sky. Something goes wrong: maybe you've prepared very expectantly for a very beautiful day: you're going to meet somebody whom you liked, things were going to be so lovely, so beautiful. But then some absurd incident happens and it all goes wrong, and you feel completely out of tune, completely jangled, as it

were, by whatever has happened. And this is our experience of life very often most of the time, and this is how we go through life, with this sort of experience. We find that everything from which we expected so much fails and doesn't live up to our expectations. So this sort of experience is what is called 'duhkha', unsatisfactoriness, or suffering.

So then what happens? We start becoming ? dissatisfied, we start feeling that nothing is going to give us any real or true or lasting satisfaction. We might have tried all sorts of things - we might have tried worldly success, we might have tried pleasure, might have tried comfort and luxury, might have tried wealth, learning - but in the end we find them unsatisfactory and there's a vague sort of restlessness inside us: it's not that we're actually suffering pain all the time, but we're just not really happy, we're not really at rest, we're not really serene, we feel some sort of vague discomfort all the time and we can't really settle down, we don't really feel that we belong, we feel perhaps in the words of the Bible that 'here we have no abiding city'. This is the sort of sensation, this is the sort of experience that arises.

So we start at first, almost unconsciously, looking for something else, looking for something other, searching for something higher. And at first we very often don't know what it is that we are looking for. This is the paradoxical situation in which we find ourselves. We don't know what we want but we're looking for it. We're looking, but we don't know what it is that we are looking for. There's just this vague sort of restlessness, groping and feeling around in all directions, perhaps, for it knows not what.

But eventually, searching in this sort of way, if it can be called indeed searching, we come into contact with something, for want of a better term, we label something spiritual. Now this word 'spiritual' is not a word that I really like, but we don't seem to have in English a better one. But I use this to mean something higher, or something which gives us a glimpse of something higher, something which is not of this world, something which is even, as the idiom goes, out of this world. And when we come into contact with it, howsoever we come into contact with it, at once there comes from us a response. We get the feeling, at least an inkling of a feeling, that this is what I am looking for, or this is what I have in fact been looking for, searching for all the time, even though I did not know it when I was actually searching.

So this sort of response to this spiritual something, when we first come into contact with it, this sort of emotional response, if you like, this is what, in the context of Buddhist tradition, we call Faith. And it's in this way that in dependence upon suffering, in dependence upon unsatisfactoriness, there arises Faith. The original word is Sradhha. We translate it as Faith, but it isn't Faith in the sense of belief, it isn't Faith in the sense of believing to be true something which cannot be rationally demonstrated. If we want a definition of Faith we may say that it is the response, even the emotional response of what is ultimate in us to what is ultimate in the universe. And for Buddhism Faith means specifically faith in the Three Jewels - faith in the Buddha, the Enlightened Teacher, faith in the Dharma, the Path or the Way leading to Enlightenment, and faith in the Sangha, the Spiritual Community, of those who are treading the Path leading ultimately to Enlightenment. And these three, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, represent for Buddhism, the highest values of existence. This is why they are called the Three Jewels, in the same way that jewels are the most precious things in the material world, similarly the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha are the three most precious things, the three highest values in the spiritual world.

So it is in this way we see, according to this formula, that in dependence upon suffering, in dependence upon our experience of the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned existence that there arises faith, in the sense of this intuitive, this emotional, even this mystical response to something higher, something supreme, something of ultimate value, when we first come into contact with it. And here we see the very beginnings of the spiritual life, the first step upon the Spiritual Path, the first stage in fact, of that Path.

And then secondly, dependent upon Faith arises Joy. This is the second stage, Faith developing

into Joy. After all, we have found what we were looking for. We might not have been able to seize hold of it, but at least we've had a glimpse of it, at least we've seen it, even behind a cloud, as it were. So naturally, after perhaps a period of long searching, long struggling, long discontent, we are pleased and happy and satisfied and contented. And we may even say more than that. Our contact with the spiritual, our contact with the higher values, which, for Buddhism, are represented by, in fact incarnate in, the Three Jewels, the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, this contact has begun to transform our lives. It isn't something intellectual, it isn't something theoretical, our hearts have actually been lifted up, this is what the word *Sraddha* literally means, a lifting up of the heart, a *cersum corda* you may say, have been lifted up to something higher, have touched something higher, have experienced, even if only for a moment, something higher. And on account of that contact, however brief, however electrical, as it were, a change begins to take place; we begin to be, we begin to become, just a little bit less self-centred. Our egoity is just a little disturbed, a little shaken up, and we become, or we begin to become, just a little bit more generous, a little bit more outward going. We tend not to hang onto things so very closely or so very convulsively. And what we may describe as the lower part of our nature, that part of our human nature which belongs to the lower evolution, that starts coming under the conscious control of that higher part of our nature which belongs to the Higher Evolution. And things like food, things like sleep, things like sex, begin to come under the control of that higher nature. Not only that, but we begin to lead a life which is more harmless and more simple than our life was before. And this too makes us feel more happy and more contented: we feel more at ease within ourselves, we don't rely so much upon external things. We don't need external things, we don't need material things so much as we used to do; we can do without them: we don't care if we haven't got a beautiful house in the suburbs, a beautiful car and all the rest of it, we sit very loose to all those things and we're much more free, we're much more detached than we were before, and we are at peace with ourselves.

But we may not have fully found, may not have fully discovered or explored what we were looking for, but we've made contact with it, we know that it is there, and that contact has at least begun to transform our lives, making us as I've said, less self-centred, more generous, and bringing our lower nature at least a little bit under control. We have a good conscience but there's no complacency, of course. And Buddhism I would say attaches very great importance indeed to this particular stage. It attaches very great importance to our having, we may say, a good and a clear conscience, feeling happy and joyful on account of our spiritual life. And this is certainly one of the things that you can notice in the East, certainly in the Buddhist East, that there, religious life, spiritual life, is much more associated with joy than it is in the West. In the West we tend to think that to be religious you must be at least a bit gloomy, or at least serious, keep a straight face, and certainly not laugh in church, or anything like that, that would be regarded as very improper. But it isn't like that in the East. There they tend to think that if you're a Buddhist or if you're leading a spiritual life, or you're following the spiritual Path, you should be more happy, more open and more carefree, more joyful than other people, and religious festivals and celebrations and occasions of that sort are occasions of joy, and I have more than once remarked on the fact that I was very, very surprised when I came back to this country after twenty years in the East, and found that the Buddhist movement was on the whole in this country such a gloomy and such a serious affair, with people hardly daring even to smile when you made a joke in the course of a lecture. This is how it was. I'm not going to elaborate on this or go into details, I have done that on other occasions. But the point which I am trying to make is that if you have found this something very precious that you were looking for, and if it has really begun to work in your life and has begun to transform it, well why should you not be happy? If you're not, if you're not happier than other people who haven't got this wonderful thing called Buddhism, who haven't got these Three Jewels, if you're not more happy than them, well, what's the use of being a Buddhist? or what does being a Buddhist or taking refuge in the Three Jewels mean? So if people who come into contact with those who have discovered this something, and who have discovered, so they believe, the Three Jewels, ought to feel that these people are more happy than people that you normally meet, and if they're not, well one can only put the question, well why not?

So much importance does Buddhism attach to this stage, of feeling happy and carefree and at peace with oneself, having a good clear conscience, and to be able to go about with a little song on your lips, as it were, that if for any reason, or on any account, you lapse from this, maybe you've done something that you shouldn't have done, so you get all sad and serious, you start beating your breast in the good old pre-Buddhistic fashion, and thinking what a terrible sinner you've been, and Buddhism says this is a very unhealthy state to be in, this state of guilt and remorse, having a bad conscience: the sooner you get out of it the better. It doesn't mean that what you did wasn't wrong - yes, it was wrong, yes you made a mistake, and you'd better admit that and own up to it and try to make up for it and not do it again. But once you've understood, and once you've tried to put it right, just put it out of your mind, just forget it and just walk on. I hope I'm not stealing anyone's thunder using this phrase, but it just came - 'just walk on' - and leave your sin behind you, it won't do you any good whatever to take or to carry it with you.

So in Buddhism we've even got special ceremonies and special services to bring about this sort of psychological effect. If you feel weighed down by any little sin that you've committed, or even a big one, well, just go, we are told, in front of the shrine, just bow down in front of the Buddha, just think it all over, just say to yourself, 'Well, what a fool I've been, I really shouldn't have done that, I really am sorry,' especially if it has involved hurt to other people: 'All right, I won't do it again, I shall be very careful, I shall watch myself, I'll be aware, I'll be mindful.' And then you recite some texts, you try to fix your mind on the teaching, you try to recollect the ideal, think of the Buddha, burn some candles if you like, light some incense, and in this purge your mind of the feeling of guilt which you did have. And in this way you restore your state of clear conscience, you restore your state of joy and your happiness in the Buddha, in the Dharma and in the Sangha. So in this way, we may say in general terms, in dependence upon Faith, this emotional response to the high spiritual values that you encounter, in dependence upon Faith there arises this joy, which should be the hallmark, we may say, of the true Buddhist.

Now thirdly, in dependence upon Joy arises Rapture. Don't think that even Joy is enough: we don't even have proper words in English to express these things: in dependence upon Joy arises Rapture: *priti* which is a very strong and a very powerful word in the original Sanskrit or the original Pali; it's an emotion, a very intense joy, even, we may say a thrilling joy, even we may say an ecstatic joy. In fact the word *priti* could very well be translated even as ecstasy, because it's experienced we're told, not just mentally, but even physically. It's an emotion of joy, or of ecstasy or of rapture, so powerful that you feel it psycho-physically, you feel it in your body as well as in your mind. We all know that when we're very deeply moved emotionally by some experience or other, either in connection with human relationships or in connection with art, or in connection with nature, when we listen to a marvellous symphony, beautifully played, or when we look at a beautiful sunset or we watch the sun sinking in the West, then sometimes it happens that we are so deeply moved that not only is there an emotion, not only is there something mental, but there's a physical innervation at the same time. We may be so greatly moved that our hair stands on end, for instance. Some people get this more easily than others: it's technically called *horripilation*, which is a dreadful word, it's better just to say 'hair-standing-on-end'. Other people even shed tears - I mean you can see people at symphony concerts, sometimes, or at the Proms, they're so much moved that you just see them wiping their eyes, in a rather maybe shame-faced sort of way, because in this country we're not supposed to do that sort of thing. But this is *Priti*. This is *Priti*, this is ecstasy, which is an experience in the body as well as in the mind. So *Priti* is this sort of thing, but even more intense, it's an overwhelming psycho-physical experience of rapture and bliss and ecstasy which may even carry one right away, we're told. So this is the sort of emotion, the sort of experience which will be generated as we tread, as we follow, the Path. In dependence upon Joy there arises Rapture, there arises Ecstasy.

Now in dependence upon Rapture - this is the fourth stage now - in dependence upon Rapture, in dependence upon Ecstasy, there arises calm, you might even say Peace, and this is a higher stage. In Pali it is called *Pasadhi*, in Sanskrit it is *Prasrabdhi*, which is a bit of a tongue twister, so we usually stick to the Pali, and say *Pasadhi*, and *Pasadhi*, calm or Peace, or calming down, or pacification, represents, we may say, the calming down of all the physical side effects of

Rapture or Ecstasy. We saw that Ecstasy, which arises in the previous stage, is something psycho-physical, you experience it mentally as an emotion, you also experience it physically as certain physical occurrences. But in this fourth stage these physical occurrences, the whole physical side of the Ecstasy experience, just subsides, and you're left with the purely mental, the purely emotional experience of Ecstasy. And we're told that the physical innervations, die down or die away, not because the Rapture, or not because the Ecstasy is less, but because it has become greater, it's gone beyond all possibility of physical expression, you're almost out of the body, so there's no physical expression at this stage. And the texts give a very interesting simile, a very interesting comparison, to illustrate this. And it runs like this:

They say that suppose an elephant steps down into a small pond - in India of course there were, there still are, lots of elephants, and elephants are very fond of bathing. I've talked about this before - so almost every day, sometimes several times a day, they like to go down into a pool, into a pond, into a lake or into a river and be bathed. They squirt water over themselves, over one another in fact. So therefore the illustration says that supposing an elephant goes down into a small pond to bathe, a pond which perhaps is not very much bigger than the elephant himself. So when this great beast gets down into that little pond what happens? The water goes splashing out at the sides. Because the elephant is so big, the pool in comparison, the pond in comparison, is so small. So we are told that this is what happens in the previous stage. The experience of ecstasy is so great, and our capacity to receive it is so small, that some of it spills over, as it were, in the form of these physical innervations, these physical side effects. But then the illustration goes on to say, suppose the elephant steps down into a great pool of water, a huge lake, or even into an enormous river. Then what happens? Big as the elephant may be when he steps into the water, when he gets even fully into the water, there's hardly a ripple, because though the elephant is so big, the body of water is immeasurably bigger still. So it said, in the same way in this fourth stage, this stage of the calming down of the physical innervations, when you come as far as this, even though the experience of ecstasy may be very great indeed, you're more able to receive it, more able to bear it, there's less external disturbance, and the physical innervations therefore die down, and only the inner, only the purely mental, the emotional experience of ecstasy is left. So this is the fourth stage.

Then the fifth stage, we're told, dependent upon calm, calm in this sense of this purely mental experience of ecstasy, which has been left, dependent upon calm arises bliss. You see how far you are going, you started with joy, then went on to rapture and ecstasy, and after a period of calm or pacification, you come on now even to bliss. And isn't it extraordinary that some of the early books written in the West on Buddhism, describe it as a gloomy and a pessimistic and a negative religion. But here we see the contrary, here we see exactly the opposite. So, in dependence upon calm arises Bliss. And this is described as a state of intense happiness. It represents the complete unification of all our emotional energies. In this state all our emotional energies are flowing together in a great river, in a great stream: they are not divided, there's no split, there's no fracture, not even any flaw, we may say, but all our emotional energies are flowing together strongly and powerfully in a single direction. And here there is not only bliss, we are told, here there is peace, here there is love, here there is compassion, here there is joy, here there is equanimity too. There are no negative emotions. By the time we're risen to this stage there is no craving, there's no fear, there's no hatred, there's no anxiety, there's no guilt, there's no remorse, there's no negative emotion whatsoever, they've all been purged. And whatever energy we'd invested in those negative emotions now flows positively in the form of bliss, in the form of this intense happiness. So in this way we rise higher and higher in the spiritual scale, in what we may call the sort of beatific calculus, as someone has described it. Then sixthly, dependent upon bliss, dependent upon this intense happiness arises concentration. And the word here in the original is Samadhi. The word Samadhi, as we saw the other day, has several different meanings, but here it means concentration - not concentration in the sense of the forcible fixation of the mind on a single object, but in the sense of that unification, that concentration, that integration which comes about quite naturally when, in that state of intense happiness, all our emotional energies are flowing together, are flowing in the same direction. And this particular stage, we may say, this sixth stage, represented by the formula that dependent upon bliss arises

concentration, this stage is based on a very important principle. It's based on the principle that when we are happy, when we're completely happy, when all our emotional energies, that is to say, are unified, then we are concentrated, concentrated in the real sense, concentrated in the true sense. So that we may say that a concentrated person is a happy person, a happy person is a concentrated person, and the happier we are, the longer we shall be able to stay concentrated. We find it difficult to stay concentrated for very long because we are not happy with our present state. If we were really and truly happy we don't need to do anything else, we just stay still as it were enjoying that happiness. But we are not happy, we are unhappy, dissatisfied, so we get restless, we go searching for this, searching for that, some distraction, some diversion, and in this way there is no concentration.

Now the connection, this connection between happiness and concentration, or between concentration and happiness, or bliss and concentration, is illustrated by a rather interesting little story from the scriptures. We are told that one day there was a discussion between a certain king and the Buddha. The king came to the Buddha to talk about his teaching, to ask him about his teaching, and in the course of the discussion the question arose between them: who is the more happy? Is the Buddha happier than the king, or is the king happier than the Buddha? So the king was quite sure that he was the happier by far of the two. He said,

"Well, look, I've got all these palaces, I've got this army, I've got this wealth, I've got all these beautiful women. So I'm obviously more happy than you. You've got nothing. What've you got? Here you are sitting underneath a tree outside some wretched hut. You've got a yellow robe and you've got a begging bowl. That's all you've got. So obviously," he said, "I'm by far the happier of the two."

So then the Buddha said,

"All right, but let's discuss it. Let me put you a question." So the Buddha said to the king, "Tell me, could you sit here perfectly still for an hour? - enjoying complete and perfect happiness?"

So the king said,

"Yes, I suppose I could." So then the Buddha said,

"All right. Could you sit here without moving, enjoying complete and perfect happiness, for six hours?" So the king said,

"Well, that would be rather difficult." Then the Buddha said,

"Well, could you sit for a whole day and a whole night, without moving, absolutely happy the whole time?" The king said,

"No, that would be beyond me." Then the Buddha said,

"But, I tell you this," he said, "I can sit here for seven days and seven nights, without moving, without stirring, and I experience all the time complete and perfect happiness without any change, without any diminution whatsoever. So," he said, "I think I am more happy than you are."

So we can see the Buddha's happiness arose out of his concentration, his concentration arose out of his happiness. Because he was happy he was able to concentrate, because he was able to concentrate he was happy. So the fact that the king could not concentrate showed that the king was not so happy, really, as he had thought. Certainly not so happy as the Buddha. So in this way we see that concentration is dependent upon happiness. The more restless we are, the more unhappy we are. The more unhappy we are, the more restless we are, the less we can concentrate. So all this, we may say, is related very much, very closely, to our practice of meditation. We know that meditation begins with concentration. And lots of us find this very difficult, and we find it difficult simply because we are not happy. This is the main reason: because our emotional energies are not unified, we try to forcibly fix the mind on a certain point. But then all sorts of disturbances arise, we get distracted, and this is because of the split within ourselves, the fact that our emotional energies are not unified and are not integrated. So concentration is something which pertains to the whole being, not just to the conscious mind, and this emotional unification or concentration of the whole being is what we call happiness.

Now this also points, we may say, to the importance of preparation for meditation. Now we can't just come along and sit down and think we can meditate without any preparation. This isn't possible. We have to go through all these previous stages if we really and truly want to meditate

and then the concentration exercises that we do, put, as it were, the finishing touch. But quite a lot of people first of all have no experience of the unsatisfactoriness of life, not really and truly, no faith has arisen, there isn't much joy, there certainly isn't much of rapture or calm, or ecstasy or bliss or anything like that, they're just in their ordinary restless, dissatisfied state, but they think they can come along and just sit down and meditate. But this is impossible. It's very significant that concentration in this higher sense, in the sense of Samadhi, arises only at the sixth stage of the path. The sixth stage of the path out of twelve, when we're half way along, it's only then that we can really and truly begin to concentrate, because our emotional energies have been unified, and we are now, perhaps for the first time in our lives, happy.

Now, seventhly, dependent upon concentration, arises knowledge and vision of things as they really are. For the first time in our lives, perhaps, we are happy, for the first time in our lives we're really concentrated, our mind is concentrated, we can look into things with a concentrated mind, and we can begin to see things as they really are, we can begin to see Reality. And this stage is of the utmost importance because here there is a sort of transition from Meditation to Wisdom, from what is really psychological to what is spiritual, and once we've reached this stage, once in dependence upon concentration there has arisen, or begun to arise, the knowledge and vision of things as they really are, then, after that, there can be no falling back, no falling away. According to the traditional teachings, the attainment of Enlightenment is now assured.

Now so far as conditioned existence is concerned, so far as mundane existence is concerned, this knowledge and vision is threefold. It consists in the insight into the fact, into the truth, that all conditioned things are impermanent, that they're constantly changing, that they're flowing, they don't remain the same for two consecutive instants. Secondly that all conditioned things are ultimately unsatisfactory. They may give us some pleasure, some happiness, for some time. But they can't give us permanent and absolute happiness. And to expect that from them is purely and simply delusion. And then thirdly there is insight into the fact, into the truth, that all conditioned things are what is called insubstantial or ultimately unreal. Not that we don't experience them, not that they're not there, empirically speaking, but as we experience them, it's all only superficial, it doesn't penetrate into the depths, it's all on the surface, it isn't truly real.

So this represents a direct perception, a direct experience: you actually see through the conditioned. Not only that, but we see through the conditioned to the unconditioned. This is the other side of the coin, this is the other half of the story: piercing through the impermanence of the conditioned, we see the permanence of the unconditioned, piercing through the unsatisfactoriness of the conditioned, we see the perfectly satisfying nature, the ultimately satisfying nature of the unconditioned, of the Absolute, of Reality itself. And piercing through the insubstantial, the unreal, we see that which is eternally and everlastingly real, we see that which Buddhism calls, or the Mahayana calls, the Dharmakaya, the Body, if you like, of Spiritual Truth, or the Absolute, or Tathata, and so on.

So, when one begins to see things in this way, when one's concentration has become so keen, that this knowledge and vision of things as they really are, arises, and you can see the conditioned in its true nature, you can see it in its depth, and you can see through the conditioned to the unconditioned, through the unreal to the real, can see through the surface right into the very depth of things, then, one's whole outlook and one's attitude radically changes, you cannot be the same as you were before; just as a man when he sees a ghost is never the same afterwards, just like Hamlet in Shakespeare's play, once he'd seen that ghost, stalking along the battlements, he's not the same, he's a changed man, he's seen something that nobody else has seen, something from another world, something from another dimension, so in the same way here, but in a much more positive sense, in a much higher sense, a more spiritual sense, once you've got a glimpse of something beyond, once you've seen through the conditioned, seen through the passing show, as it were, once you've had a glimpse of the unconditioned, a glimpse of that higher dimension, that higher Reality, the Absolute, if you like, call it anything that you wish, call it even God, if you like, once you've had a glimpse of that, a real glimpse, not just an idea, not a concept, not a speculation, but a real glimpse, a real contact, a real communication if you like, then you can't

be the same, there's a permanent change takes place in your life, you're re-oriented, you've turned about, to use the Yogacara expression, or begun to turn about, in the deepest seat of your consciousness.

Now, eighthly, dependent upon knowledge and vision of things as they are, there arises withdrawal. This is sometimes translated as revulsion or disgust, but that's too strong, that's too psychological. This particular stage, the stage of withdrawal, represents, we may say, the clean, even the serene withdrawal from involvement in the things which we have seen through. If you have seen through something, you're no longer involved in it. You withdraw from it. We're told it's just like seeing a mirage in the desert. At first we may be very interested in those palm trees and that apparent oasis, and we may be hastening in that direction. But as soon as we realise this, as soon as we see that it's a mirage, it's a fata morgana, it isn't real, it isn't really there, then we're no longer interested, we stop, we don't hasten in that direction any more, any longer.

So this is what is represented by this stage of withdrawal: it's a sort of sitting loose to life. You play all the games that other people play, but you know that they're games. A child takes his game very seriously. To the child his game is life. But the adult can join in the child's game and play with the child, but the adult knows it's all a game. And if the child beats him in the game, the adult doesn't mind, it's only a game, he doesn't get upset. So, in the same way, once we have seen through the games that people play, (to quote something), once we've seen through the games that people play, we can go on playing the games, it doesn't mean that we don't play those games, but we know that they're just games, and we withdraw from them, there's an inner withdrawal, even if there isn't any external withdrawal. We may be doing what is necessary objectively, but subjectively we're not really caught up. So this is what is meant by withdrawal. We've seen through the conditioned. So in a way, we're still part of the conditioned. We play all the conditioned games, but we know that they're games, and in our hearts we've withdrawn from them.

Now, ninthly, dependent upon withdrawal arises dispassion. Not a very good translation, but I'm afraid the English language can't do better than that. Now withdrawal, the previous stage, is the movement of detachment from conditioned existence; but dispassion we may say, represents the fixed stage of actually being detached. And here, in this state, we cannot be moved, we cannot be stirred, we cannot be touched by any worldly happening, anything conditioned. It may happen to us, anything may happen to us, but we can't really be disturbed; it's a state we may say of complete spiritual imperturbability: not hardness, not stoniness, not insensitivity, not 'apataya' in the stoic sense of the word merely, but a state of serene imperturbability, like that exemplified by the Buddha when he sat underneath the Bodhi tree, and according to legend, according to myth, we are told, along came Mara, the embodiment of evil, with his forces, and in Buddhist art this episode is very often depicted, you see Mara leading all his army, with elephants and horses, and soldiers and all sorts of monstrous demon figures, and you see that they're throwing great rocks, and spitting fire and releasing arrows against the Buddha, hundreds and thousands of them swarming and swirling around, but you see that the Buddha just doesn't take any notice at all. He doesn't even see them, doesn't even look, doesn't even listen. He's in a state of complete imperturbability, a state of complete dispassion. And this is what this stage represents. You're so firmly fixed in the truth, so firmly fixed in the unconditioned, in the absolute, your mind is so absorbed in that, that nothing can touch you. And there's a very beautiful touch, as it were, in Buddhist art and in Buddhist literature, when they represent, when they depict, all the arrows, all the stones, all the flames which are hurled by these demon hosts just sort of closing in on the Buddha, whizzing through the air. But what happens? When they touch the edge of his halo, they just turn into flowers and they drop onto the ground. So this is the state of imperturbability, the state of dispassion. All these forces of Mara they rise up against you, all these weapons come hurtling through the air, but as soon as they touch the edge of your halo, they just turn into flowers and they drop. So this is the state represented by this ninth stage, the stage of independence upon withdrawal there arises dispassion.

Then tenthly, dependent upon dispassion there arises freedom - spiritual freedom, *dinukti*.

Nowadays there's quite a lot of talk about freedom, and most people, it seems, think that freedom means freedom simply to do as one likes. But the Buddhist conception of freedom is rather different. In the earliest Buddhist teaching, we may say, freedom is twofold: it's ceto-vimutti, or freedom of mind, in the first place, which means complete freedom from all subjective emotional and psychological bias, complete freedom from prejudice, from all psychological conditioning. And secondly, panjavimuti, or freedom of Wisdom, which means freedom from all wrong views, all ignorance, all false philosophy, all opinion. So this sort of freedom, this complete freedom, spiritual freedom, total freedom, freedom of heart and mind, freedom at the highest possible level, at the very summit of one's existence, this is the aim and this is the object of Buddhism.

Once the Buddha addressed his disciples and said, 'O monks, just as the ocean has got one taste, from whatsoever part of it you take the water - one taste, the taste of salt,' - whether you take water from the Atlantic Ocean or the Bay of Bengal or the Indian Ocean or the Suez Canal, wherever it may be it tastes salt - 'So, in the same way,' he said, 'my teaching, my doctrine, has got one taste, whether it's the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Four Brahmaviharas, Three Trainings, Three Refuges, they've all got one taste, and,' he said, 'that taste is the taste of freedom - vimutirasa, the taste of freedom.' So this is the final objective, if you like, the end of Buddhism, this taste of complete spiritual freedom, freedom from everything conditioned, freedom even from the very distinction between the conditioned and the unconditioned, as the Mahayana goes on to say.

Now, eleventhly and lastly, dependent upon freedom arises knowledge of the destruction of the asavas. One isn't only free. It isn't even enough to be free. But one knows that one is free, and one knows that one is free because one is free from the asavas. This is one of the those untranslatable Pali and Sanskrit words: it means a sort of mental poison that floods the mind. It's a very expressive word. And the asavas are three: there's kamasava, which means the poison of desire or craving for experience through the five senses. Then pavasava, craving for any form of conditioned existence, even, we're told, for existence as a god in heaven; and avidasava, the poison of spiritual ignorance. So, when these poisons are extinct, and one knows that they are extinct, then one is said to be enlightened, one has reached the end of the Spiritual Path, one has gained Buddhahood.

So these, these twelve, from suffering right up to knowledge of the destruction of the Asavas, these twelve stages constitute the spiritual Path, and they also constitute, we may say, the whole process of what we elsewhere describe as the Higher Evolution. And we can see so easily from this formulation, how the whole thing, the whole Spiritual life in fact is a natural process of growth. The succeeding stage of the Path is the product, we may say, of the overflow, as it were, of the very excess, of the very prodigality, of the preceding stage; as soon as one stage reaches its fullness, it inevitably passes over into the next. And we find this in our meditation also. Sometimes people ask, well, when we get up to a certain stage in meditation, well, how shall we get on to the next? Well, there's no need to ask that, there's no need to enquire that. If you get up to a certain stage and you go on cultivating that, so that it becomes more and more perfect, more and more full, as it were, more and more complete, then out of its very fullness it will move forward, under its own momentum, into the next stage: it will become the next stage. When you perfect any lower stage, well, automatically, the transition to a higher stage of perfection, of development, begins. So this is what happens here, the succeeding stage of the Path is given birth to by the preceding stage, when that preceding stage reaches a point of fullness. So we don't really have to bother about the next step, the next stage, just bother about this step and this stage, cultivate that. Let there be a theoretical idea of the next stage, but don't bother about it too much. Once this stage is fully developed it will automatically pass over into the next, into the succeeding stage.

So we've come, we may say, quite a long way tonight. We've traversed, at least in theory, at least in imagination, all these twelve stages of the spiritual path, and for the moment there isn't very much more to say, except just for one last word.

We've spoken of the spiritual path, we've spoken of the stages of the Spiritual Path, in a way we've been concerned with the very essence of religion, or at any rate with the essence of Buddhism. But some people might have thought that there's a rather important omission. We've apparently exhausted all the important topics within the spiritual life, but we haven't really said anything about God. And in the West we tend to think that any religious discussion or exposition must centre about God, and to talk about religion without talking about God, in the West, is rather like talking about Hamlet and leaving out the Prince of Denmark.

But not for Buddhism. Those who know anything about Buddhism at all, and there are quite a few of you here today, I believe, will not be surprised, because we know that Buddhism is a non-theistic religion: there's a Path and there's a Goal, which is Enlightenment, Buddhahood, the culmination of the whole evolutionary process. But it all gets under way, it all proceeds, it all reaches its height, its perfection, without any reference to this idea which we in the West tend to think is inseparable from religion, this idea of a Supreme Being, and a personal God. And for many people this is, of course, one of the great attractions of Buddhism.

Now I think even in some Christian quarters they're beginning to think that God is a bit of a liability. I sometimes think that Christianity without God would be quite a wonderful system. If you could only get rid of God from Christianity it wouldn't be all that different from Buddhism. But it's the presence of God which makes the difference. But some Christians are just allowing God quickly to die away: he's being pensioned off we may say, he's gone into retirement. Some Christians even say that God is dead. But they're still busily conducting His funeral. So they're still very much we may say tied up with Him. They're still carrying him, they won't put Him down even though He is dead.

But anyway this spiritual path, these stages of the spiritual path, represent the whole process of the Higher Evolution, which proceeds, which goes on its own way, without any reference to this, which we, as Buddhists, can't help feeling is an out-moded concept, of God in the sense of the Supreme Being, the Creator of the Universe. The Higher Evolution goes on its own way, evolving from man to Buddha, and we achieve this Higher Evolution, this evolution from humanity to super-humanity- to Buddhahood - by developing, by cultivating within ourselves, the stages of the Spiritual Path.