

The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path

Lecture 47: The Nature of Existence: Right Understanding

Mr Chairman and Friends,

Today we are beginning a new series of talks, and for me the beginning of a new series of talks is always something of an adventure, with an element, if I may say so, of excitement about it. There is certainly, one may say, an element of uncertainty, because after all one never knows how many people are going to turn up. Sometimes attendance depends upon very variable factors like the weather and whether your advertisement was inserted in time, and things like that. In fact sometimes one doesn't even know whether any people are going to turn up at all. And even if they do turn up one doesn't know what their response is going to be. One can't predict this, one can't judge this in advance. No doubt in the same way the beginning of a new series of talks is, especially for our regular people, our regular members and friends, also something of an adventure, because you don't know exactly what it is that you are going to get, or not get, as the case may be. When you come here, especially when you come for the first time after seeing our advertisement in the *New Statesman*, or one of the local Kensington papers, or having a circular pushed through your letterbox, as I believe has in fact been done, you don't know what you're going to get, and you don't know how you're going to respond or react. You don't know whether you're in for an evening of immeasurable boredom or whether you're going to be surprised and thrilled and really excited. You don't know when you come here for the first time whether you're never going to come again, or whether you're going to stick with us for life! You just don't know. So for the audience also, for all of you also, we hope that there's an element of excitement, an element of uncertainty, an element of adventure, in the beginning of a new series like this.

But at least, even if you don't know exactly what you are going to get in the course of the evening, at least you know in a very general way what the subject of the whole series is. For the next eight weeks we shall be dealing here, week by week, with The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path. And there are quite a number of reasons why this particular topic is being taken up.

First of all there is of course its intrinsic importance. If we know anything about Buddhism at all, if we have even the merest glimmering of understanding about it, we know that Buddhism is essentially, above all else, a way or a path, a way or a path leading to a state of realisation of Truth, of oneness with Reality if you like, which we call Enlightenment, which we call *nirvana*, which we call the Realisation of one's own innate Buddha Nature. And the Noble Eightfold Path, we may say - The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path - is perhaps the best known, certainly one of the most widely known, of all the formulations, of all the ways of explaining and expounding this way or this path to Enlightenment, to *nirvana*, or to Buddhahood. Moreover, as some at least of you will know, the Noble Eightfold Path is the fourth of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Truths of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and then the way leading to the cessation of suffering, which is of course this same Noble Eightfold Path. And we find, if we look back to the early days of Buddhism, if we look back to the first occasion when, after his Enlightenment, the Buddha opened his mouth and taught - if we look back and recall the first sermon or the first discourse, the discourse of the Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma in the Deerpark at Benares, some slides of which we saw in this very place only last Sunday, then we will find that the main content of the Buddha's first discourse, the main content of his first enunciation of his great spiritual discovery to humanity is again none else than this Noble Eightfold Path, as part of the Four Noble Truths. And if we follow the whole course of Buddhist history, if we examine school after school and teaching after teaching - whether in India, whether in Tibet or Burma or Thailand or Japan or Ceylon, or any other Buddhist country, wherever Buddhism has gone - we find constantly, in all these schools, in all these traditions, references, again and again, to the Four Noble Truths - especially to the Noble Eightfold Path.

So if we do not know something about these things, if we don't know, if we don't understand the Four Truths and the Eightfold Path in some detail, then we know very little indeed about Buddhism. If we wish to know, if we want to know *anything*, at least we should know these things - the Four Noble Truths and especially the Noble Eightfold Path. And this is one of the reasons, if not the main reason, why we are having this series of talks - and we've called them talks rather than lectures because they will be much more informal than the lectures which we had at Kingsway Hall. We are having them for this reason, because of the intrinsic importance of this topic of the Noble Eightfold Path. These talks are, by the way, I should add, even insist, intended both for our old friends, old members, as well as for new friends and new members. They are intended for new friends, especially for those who have been coming now for quite a few months to our meditation classes at Sakura in Monmouth Street, to help give them some idea of basic Buddhist teaching as a sort of supplement to their practice of concentration and meditation. So far as the old members and friends are concerned, these talks are intended or devised to help them revise and refresh what they already know so that they can not only deepen the knowledge that they already have, but be in a position - perhaps later on - to communicate it to other people. Although our movement is a comparatively young one it's a growing one - classes and other activities are expanding all the time and there is a very great deal of teaching work involved, and sooner or later, therefore, some of our older and more experienced members and friends will have to share some of the, I won't say burden but certainly some of the responsibility, for teaching some of the new people, the new classes. So

for the old members also this series of talks is intended. And week by week, as you will already have seen from the printed programme, we shall be dealing with just one step, one *anga*, to use the correct term, of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path. And today, in our first talk in the series, under the heading of 'The Nature of Existence' we are dealing with Right Understanding, which is the first step, the very first step of the Eightfold Path.

Now this evening we've got rather more ground to cover than we shall be having to cover in future talks. I want to speak principally about three things, or deal principally with three major topics. First of all I want to say something about the Noble Eightfold Path in general. Then I want to go on to say something about the relationship between Right Understanding, the first step or first *anga* of the path, and all the other seven steps. And lastly, most importantly of all, I want to say something about Right Understanding itself.

Now first of all the Noble Eightfold Path in general. Not very much, I feel, needs to be said here, just a few words of comment and explanation. The word which in English we render as 'Noble' in the Sanskrit and Pali original is *Arya*. And originally in ancient times in India the word *Arya* was used more or less in a racial sense. The invaders that came down from central Asia, through the passes of the North West, pouring into the plains of India, subduing and conquering the local indigenous people - these were known as *Aryas*. So originally the word had a racial connotation, but gradually as the centuries went by the word assumed ethical and spiritual meaning. And in Buddhism the word *Arya* means connotes whatever pertains to, whether directly or indirectly, the realisation of Ultimate Reality, whatever is directly concerned with things spiritual, either with the spiritual path or the spiritual goal, or aspects of spiritual life. All this is called *Arya*. So *Arya* is not only, we may say, 'noble', but also 'holy'. It has that shade of meaning too. And some translators therefore speak not only of the Four *Noble* Truths and the *Noble* Eightfold Path, some translators speak of the Four *Holy* Truths and the *Holy* Eightfold Path.

I remember in this connection a rather amusing little story which was told me many years ago by Lama Anagarika Govinda, whom also we saw on the slides here last Sunday. I remember once in the early days of my contact with Lama Govinda, we were talking about Buddhism in Europe and especially Buddhism in Germany. So I happened to ask Lama Govinda how many different branches of Buddhism there were in Germany. So he said two, and he said they are always at loggerheads. So I was naturally interested and I enquired, what is the cause of the controversy, why are they always at loggerheads? So he said it was a long story - these are usually long stories, things of this sort - but he said the principal point of difference is this. One group in Germany (and this of course relates to affairs forty or fifty years ago - I hope they're different now), he said one group insists that *Arya* means 'Noble'; the other insists it means 'Holy'. So there are two groups. There are the 'Noble Truthers' and the 'Holy Truthers', and he said they are always at loggerheads! So this is an illustration of the sort of way in which people do fall out. But anyway this is just by the way, and it only goes to illustrate how careful one must be not to be carried away by, not to be swayed by, or emotionally influenced by, just words. Perhaps the whole controversy isn't very important at all.

Now *asta*. We speak of the *aryastangika-marga*. *Asta* means simply 'eight'. *Anga* means 'limb'. This is rather interesting. We say *astangika marga*, translating as 'Eightfold Path', but we usually speak of the Eightfold Path as consisting of eight successive steps or eight successive stages, but it isn't really like that. The original word is *anga* and *anga* means a limb. In modern Indian languages also *anga* means 'limb', it means a shoot. You speak of say '*panchanga pranama*' - the prostration with the five limbs - that is to say the two legs, the two arms and head, and the head is called *uttama anga*, the 'supreme limb'. So *anga* is limb or part or aspect, not step, not stage. So therefore we find - and this is a very important correlative - we find that the eight *angas* of the Eightfold Path, though usually presented as successive stages - as if to say you take this step and then this and then the next - are not really, not necessarily at least, successive at all. They can be, in a sense, simultaneous.

And this brings us now to our second major topic, which is the relationship between Right Understanding, the first of these so-called steps or *angas*, and the seven other *angas*.

First of all let me say a few words about Right Understanding itself. Right Understanding is the usual translation, but here one must observe that the usual translation is very inadequate. In Sanskrit it is *samyag-drsti*, or in Pali *samma ditthi*. I don't like always having to bring up Sanskrit and Pali words but sometimes it's necessary because we can get at the real meaning of these terms, of these expressions, only by going back to the original languages - but *samyag-drsti*, usually translated as Right Understanding - what does *samyag-drsti* really mean? *Arya*, which is prefixed to all the eight *angas* of the Path, means proper, thorough. It also means whole, complete, perfect. It's certainly not right as opposed to wrong. If you speak of *Right* Understanding, you get the impression of a right understanding as opposed to a wrong understanding, or right speech as opposed to wrong speech, right action as opposed to wrong action. So if you translate *samyak* all the time by 'right', 'right', 'right', you get the impression of the whole path being interpreted in a rather narrowly ethical, not to say narrowly moralistic sense. But *samyak* is much more than just 'Right'. As I've said it's whole, complete, perfect. Probably 'perfect' is the best translation.

And *Drsti* is from the root meaning 'to see'. *Drsti* means sight, it means view, it means vision. It's not just 'understanding'. Certainly not understanding in the theoretical or the intellectual or the abstract sense. It is something direct, something immediate, something, if you like almost intuitive. So *samyag-drsti*, the first step of the Noble Eightfold Path, is not just right understanding. If we translate it thoughtlessly as right understanding a whole subtle misunderstanding is introduced. *Samyag-drsti* is much more like - it is better translated as - Integral View or Perfect Vision. If we translate it in this we get much closer, much nearer to the real meaning and to the inner feel, as it were, of the expression. Integral View or Perfect Vision. If you just stop and think for a moment, if you try to, as it were, *feel* these different translations, *feel* their spiritual value, you will find that Perfect Vision suggests, conveys, something rather different from right understanding. Right understanding is a bit trite, a bit ordinary, a bit intellectual. But if you say Perfect Vision, it's as though a whole new world has opened up in front of you; as though an extra dimension, as it were, had been introduced. So let it be therefore Perfect Vision.

But a vision of what? A vision, we may say, and here we are speaking just provisionally, for the time being, a vision of the nature of existence, the Truth or the Reality of things. What this is or what this involves or implies we shall see a little later on. We haven't yet finished dealing with the relationship between right understanding or rather Perfect Vision on the one hand, and the seven other *angas* on the other hand

Now according to Indian Buddhist tradition, Ancient Indian Buddhist tradition - and this is very important - the Noble Eightfold Path is divided into, or falls quite naturally into, two sections. The first of these is known as the *Path of Vision*, the Sanskrit is the *darsana-marga* - and the second the *Path of Transformation*, the *bhavana-marga*. So Path of Vision, Path of Transformation. The Path of Vision corresponds to the first *anga*, the first so-called step, that is to say Perfect Vision. This represents the Path of Vision. And the Path of Transformation corresponds to all the other *angas*, all the other steps, so called, of the Eightfold Path. So that under the heading of the Path of Vision you've got the first *anga*. Under the heading of the Path of Transformation you've got all the others, all that other seven; that is Right Resolve, Right Speech and so on, right down to Right Meditation. Now what does this mean? What is the significance of this distribution of Right or Perfect Vision under the heading of the Path of Vision, and all the other *angas*, all seven of them, under the heading of the Path of Transformation. What is the significance of this? What does it mean?

The Right Understanding or the Perfect Vision, we may say, represents what we may describe as the phase of initial spiritual insight and experience. And the rest of the Eightfold Path represents the transformation of one's whole being in all its heights and depths, all its aspects, from top to bottom, in accordance with this insight and this experience. It represents a complete, a total, thoroughgoing transformation of one's emotional life, of one's speech, one's communication with other people, one's relationships with other people in general, one's livelihood and so on. A total transformation of one's being in all these different aspects, though not necessarily in this strict sequence. One may for instance transform one's livelihood, which is the fifth step *before* one's speech, which is only the third; but eventually, in one way or another, sooner or later, the whole being is to be transformed, in its heights, in its depths, conscious and unconscious.

Now this initial spiritual insight and experience, this Perfect Vision or Path of Vision may arise in quite a number of different ways for different people. There is no uniform pattern. There's a very great variety, a very rich variety, among people; and that shows itself in their spiritual life also, shows itself in the way in which they enter upon the spiritual path. The way in which the Path of Vision arises for them. For some people it comes as a result of personal tragedy, bereavement or loss of one kind or another. It's as though their whole existence was upset and disturbed. It's as though a great earthquake had upset everything which they had cherished or everything which they had held dear. So in this ruin, as it were, in this wreck, as it were, of their lives they start questioning, they start looking deeper, they start wondering about the meaning and the purpose and the basis of it all. And in this way, for some people the Path of Vision arises. out of the depths, even out of the misery sometimes, of their personal tragedy. In this way the Path of Vision arises for them.

For some people again it arises by way of what we may describe as spontaneous mystical experience. I don't quite like this word 'mystical'. For many people it's much too redolent of 'mystery' or 'mystery mongering', but we don't have a better word, so let's not hesitate to use it. For some people, I say, the Path of Vision arises by way of a spontaneous mystical experience. And it is surprising, I would say, how many people, when one gets to know them, have had at some time or other an experience of this sort; some rare moment, maybe of ecstasy, maybe of insight, maybe of a tremendous love which suddenly, as it were, apparently without any preparation, possessed them, swept them away, lifted them into a new dimension and completely altered their whole outlook upon life. One does sometimes come across very remarkable instances of this sort of thing. One can find a number of such instances, a number of such cases, collected in a very famous book, an old book, but still well worth reading - Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness*, which I'm sure many of you know already. So this is another way in which the Path of Vision may arise - by spontaneous mystical experience.

And under the heading of mystical experience I include also our experience of nature; moments when we are overwhelmed by the sight of some wonderful sunset, or when in the midst of the countryside we experience a great,

all-pervading peace and stillness, or sometimes when we are looking at a beautiful picture or listening to music. Sometimes we are carried away, as it were. We enter into some new dimension of existence, and in this way too the Path of Vision can arise.

For others it arises as a result of deep, even prolonged, thought, philosophical study, endeavour to reach and to know the truth with the help of the intellect, to think things out, to reach into the depths of being with reason, with intellect, with knowledge. The way of the philosopher, the way of the thinker, the way of the sage. Some people, as it were, think their way through into reality, into the Path of Vision.

But then again for others it may arise in a quite different way, as a result of the practice of meditation. When the mind has been deliberately calmed, deliberately stilled, when thoughts have been abolished, but when clear consciousness, awareness, still persists, then there may arise under those conditions also, the Path of Vision.

There are other ways too. Sometimes the Path of Vision may arise for those engaged in - even in the midst of - altruistic activities. Those who are engaged in serving the sick, nursing the sick, looking after the old, who are sacrificing themselves, their personal interests, who are completely selfless on the plane of work and activity. For them too - perhaps they may not even know it in the ordinary sense - the Path of Vision may arise.

And finally it may arise also, for some people at least, simply as the result of our whole experience of life, especially as we get older, and as we get, we hope, more mature. All the threads seem to be coming together. When the whole pattern, the whole picture of our lives seems to make some sort of sense, seems to have some sort of glimmer of meaning. Then just out of the depths of our human maturity sometimes, the Path of Vision may arise. I am not of course suggesting that Wisdom comes automatically as you get older - far from it. If such was the case we need not bother when we were young, it would come when we got older automatically! I am not suggesting that, but for some people certainly who have led a reasonable human life, a truly human life, then as they mellow, as they get older, as they sweeten perhaps a bit, as their experience clarifies, the Path of Vision, for them, may arise.

And sometimes one has even known cases where the Path of Vision has arisen for *some* people even in a dream. Even in a dream. There's a very remarkable case indeed in Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* - the case of a man - an American - who had a very vivid, a very intense, one can only describe it as archetypal spiritual dream, which completely altered his whole life, the memory of which he never forgot; which altered, even transformed his whole existence, in a dream.

So the Path of Vision can arise in all these different ways for different people, But howsoever it arises - whether it is out of personal tragedy and loss; by way of spontaneous mystical experience; by experience of nature or the arts, or from deep thought, philosophical study, through meditation; or as the result of altruistic activity or our whole experience of life; or whether in a dream - howsoever it arises, one thing we should be very careful of, and that is that we do not lose it, we do not forget it. And this so easily happens. One might have a wonderful experience. Maybe the Path of Vision has arisen, but then what happens? - it's lost, it's obscured. As the poet says, 'the world is too much with us'. We may have a wonderful experience, so wonderful that we might think we could never forget it, but after a few days, certainly after a few weeks, it's no longer there. There's no trace of it any longer. It's as though it had never been. So this is what we must watch, what we must be very careful of - that if the Path of Vision does ever arise for us, whether in meditation, whether as a result of philosophical study, or in any other way, we should be really careful not to lose it, to cherish it, to cultivate it, to dwell upon it, to try to deepen it, try to clarify it, try to develop it all the time, and eventually try to permeate with it, try to *transform* with it, our whole being, our whole life.

In other words, to sum up this great Buddhist teaching of the Path of Vision and the Path of Transformation - the first step or *anga* of the Eightfold Path and all the other seven, we may say that their aim is to enable us to bring, or our aim is to bring, the whole of our life, the whole of our being, the whole of our existence on all levels up to the level of the highest moments of our lives. To bring our whole life up to the level of life's highest moments. And this is what it means to evolve spiritually. This is what it means really to follow the Noble Eightfold Path. First of all to achieve by one means or another this vision, this Path of Vision of the nature of existence, and then to transform our whole being in accordance with this vision.

Now for our third major topic, which is Right Understanding itself, or rather Perfect Vision itself.

In Buddhist literature there are many expositions of Right Understanding or Perfect Vision. One might even go so far as to say there are perhaps too many expositions, and if one is not very careful some at least of these expositions, as our chairman hinted a little earlier on, can lead to misunderstanding or at least they are not very helpful.

Some Buddhist writers, one finds, when they come in the course of their exposition of Buddhism, especially exposition of the Four Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, try to include, if not to cram in, at this point the whole of Buddhist doctrine. It's as though when they came to Right Understanding they rubbed their hands as if to say, what

I couldn't get in anywhere else I can push in here, because it's all a matter of Right Understanding, it's all something to be understood; so in everything goes - the whole doctrine, the whole teaching, the whole philosophy as it were.

So this tends to create the wrong impression. And people often think, I have found - students of Buddhism often think - that Right Understanding means, or Right Understanding as the first step of the Path means, making a thorough study of the whole of Buddhist thought, including history of Buddhist thought, and taking a sort of Ph.D in Buddhist Philosophy. They think that this is Right Understanding, the first step of the Noble Eightfold Path. So the first thing you have to do before you can *hope* to be a Buddhist, before you can start walking upon that Eightfold Path, is to get down to, to learn all about, the Madhyamikas and Yogacarins and the Abidharmikas and Sarvastivadins and the Tientai School and the Avatamsaka School and all the rest of it. And then you may put your foot on the Path and start practising Buddhism. Some think like this unfortunately. But really it isn't at all like that.

One must repeat, one must emphasise that *samyag-drsti* is just Perfect Vision, Perfect Vision, nothing to do with study of the schools of Buddhist philosophy; and this vision is something quite simple, quite direct, immediate, and more of the nature of a spiritual experience than of the nature of intellectual understanding. Of course, the experience, the insight, can be *expressed* intellectually in terms of doctrinal concepts, philosophical systems and so on, but it is not identical with these. The Vision itself stands apart, stands above.

So what is this Perfect Vision? I've said it's a vision of the nature of existence. But then again the question arises, what *is* the nature of existence? This is very difficult to say. It's difficult to say because it's only too easy to say. I'm not being paradoxical. What I mean is it's as though too many concepts lay ready to hand. One can say, 'Oh yes, it's this, it's that' - there's so much Buddhist Philosophy available to us. We can slap on a few terms, concepts, refer to this system or that system and say, 'Well, there is the nature of existence according to Buddhism.' But it's too slick, as it were, too easy, and we must beware, we must resist, this temptation of producing our concepts too readily and saying that the nature of existence is like this or like that. After all, what one wants to communicate or try to communicate is not a set of ideas, it's not a system of philosophy - it's what the Buddha himself called in his own language quite unambiguously a *drsti*, - a vision. Not a thought, not an idea, but a vision. It is that which one is trying to communicate. Not just expound ideas.

Now there are two ways principally in which a vision can be communicated. A vision of the nature of existence. It can be communicated through images, it can be communicated through ideas, through concepts. So let's try the images first. There are three main images in Buddhism. Some of you, I know, are familiar with these, but let's just try to conjure them up again, closing our eyes if necessary and just try to see them, not understanding them, not think them, but to see them, imagine them.

First of all there's the image, the great image with which we're almost all familiar, of *the Wheel of Life*. If you just close your eyes you will see a circle or wheel - in fact four concentric circles with a hub at the middle, a hub with three animals running round inside it - a cock, a pig, a snake - representing the three passions, the three poisons which control and dominate our minds, and make revolve the whole wheel of mundane existence. Then next to that in the second circle we see two segments, a white half, a black half, the good path leading up, the dark path, the bad path, leading down. And then in the next circle we see divided into five or into six segments, the different worlds, the different spheres of beings - humans, animals, divine, infernal, demoniacal - all these spheres of existence within which, according to Buddhism, sentient beings may be reborn and continuously reborn. And then the outermost circle, like a great ring, divided into twelve segments - the twelve *nidanans*, the twelve links in the process of what is called dependent origination, or conditioned co-production, explaining in detail the whole process of birth, and life, and death and rebirth.

So this is the first great image, the first great symbol. This is what we see, to begin with, when we have a vision of the nature of existence. We see mundane existence, conditioned existence, going around like this. A great Wheel. a Wheel of Life, a Wheel of Death, with ourselves involved in it, with it, and going round and round also with it, in a constant process of action and reaction, and again action and reaction. There's no time to describe it in detail, no time to describe its workings in detail. All that will take too long. In any case many of you are familiar with the details and can probably visualise this great wheel quite accurately, quite easily. So this is the first great image which we see in our vision of the nature of existence - the Wheel of Life, which is us, which is ourselves, as well as all sentient existence, all conditioned existence.

And then the second great image. The Buddha. The Buddha, usually depicted seated on a lotus flower, a white or a pink lotus, seated underneath the Bodhi-tree, the Tree of Wisdom, with its great branches spread out above him and its canopy of beautiful leaves, and radiating at the same time light of various colours. There are many more elaborate versions of this image, the image of the Buddha. The best known, or one of the best known, is one I've described before, that is to say the Mandala or sacred circle of the Five Buddhas. This pertains more to the esoteric teaching but I can just touch upon it now. The Mandala of the Five Buddhas with the white Buddha in the centre, the red Buddha to the west, the green Buddha to the north, the dark blue Buddha to the east, the yellow Buddha to the south.

The Mandala of the Five Buddhas with their five colours. This is a more elaborate version, a slightly more elaborate version of the Buddha image. There are still more elaborate versions in the form of the Pure Land, or the Happy Land, Sukhavati, but we've no time to go into all that now.

And the third image, the third great image of Buddhism revealed to us in our vision of the nature of existence, is the path or the way, also known as the Spiral of Spiritual Progress, and this image, this symbol, the path or the way, connects the other two images. Imagine your Wheel of Life down here. Imagine again your Mandala of the Five Buddhas up there, and imagine your path or your way or your spiral between them and connecting them and leading from the one to the other.

So these are the three images, the three great images, in terms of which Buddhism presents its vision, its perfect vision of the nature of existence. It's a vision, therefore, first of all of our actual present state of bondage, spiritual bondage, as represented by the Wheel of Life; a vision of our future potential state of Enlightenment as represented by the Buddha, or the Mandala of Buddhas; and it's a vision of the way leading from one to the other. A vision, if you like, of the whole future course of human evolution. We've come very far up indeed, up the evolutionary ladder, but we've very much farther still to go. We still have to evolve from, out of, the Wheel of Life, the round of existence, up this spiritual path, up that spiral, into the state of Buddhahood as represented by the Buddha image and in greater detail by the Mandala of the Five Buddhas.

So this is our vision of the nature of existence, our vision of truth if you like, our vision of reality in terms of images. The Wheel of Life, the Mandala of the Five Buddhas, and the path between. The mundane and the Transcendental, *samsara* and *nirvana*; and the path supplying the connecting link.

Now the vision, Buddhism's vision of the nature of existence, can also be communicated, as I've suggested, in terms of concepts, though perhaps less vividly in terms of concepts than in terms of images. And traditionally Perfect Vision is explained in terms of seeing and understanding the truth of certain doctrinal categories. And just for the sake of completeness at least I'm going to run quickly through some of these. We should be careful to remember, though, that here we are not concerned with merely theoretical understanding. We are trying to get a glimpse of truth with the help of these doctrinal categories, trying to achieve some kind of vision of the nature of existence. First of all, one of the most important doctrinal categories - a vision of the Four Noble Truths themselves. Right Vision is usually explained in the doctrinal manuals as a vision or understanding, if you like, of The Four Noble Truths, and these truths are, as many of you know: the Truth of Suffering or unsatisfactoriness or disharmony, which we see all around us and also within ourselves; the Truth of the Cause of that Suffering or unsatisfactoriness or disharmony, which is selfish craving, thirst, in ourselves as well as in others; the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, the total eradication, abolition, of suffering, which is synonymous with the state of *nirvana* or Enlightenment or Buddhahood; and finally the Way leading to the Cessation of Suffering, which is this same Noble Eightfold Path which we are now studying.

Now it is interesting to note that the first and second Truths, that is to say the Truth of Suffering and the Cause of Suffering, correspond to the image of the Wheel of Life. This represents, as it were pictorially, in the terms of an image, what the doctrine or the teaching of the Four Noble Truths represents in terms of suffering and the cause of suffering. Suffering is the effect, craving or thirst is the cause. So there's a cause-effect, action and reaction, relationship, in other words the cyclic pattern of action and reaction which in fact the Wheel of Life represents.

The third Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, or *nirvana*, corresponds to the image of the Buddha or the Mandala of Buddhas. And the fourth Truth, the Truth of the Noble Eightfold Path, of course corresponds to the image of the Path or the Spiral itself. So we therefore see that our Four Noble Truths present conceptually what our three images presented in terms of images, but it is the same vision, the same vision of the nature, in this case, of conditioned and unconditioned existence and the path between, presented on the one hand in terms of three images, on the other hand conceptually in terms of the Four Noble Truths, but the same vision.

Then secondly, conceptually speaking, Perfect Vision is often explained in terms of *the Three Characteristics of All Conditioned Existence*. And these are: that conditioned existence is suffering; that it is impermanent; and that it is devoid of true selfhood. Perhaps I should say a few words about each of these in turn.

Broadly speaking there are three kinds of *Suffering*, according to Buddhism. There's what we may describe as actual suffering - as when you have a toothache or you cut your finger and so on. There's potential suffering, as when you possess something. You enjoy possessing it but you can lose it. If you lose it there's suffering. So even though you enjoy it at present, potentially it is suffering, in the sense that you may lose it one day, or *must* lose it one day. And then there's what we may call essential or metaphysical suffering. The fact that nothing mundane, nothing earthly, nothing conditioned, can give full or final satisfaction to the human heart or the human spirit, which can be satisfied ultimately only by the Unconditioned, only by Truth itself. And everything short of that therefore, in a sense, is the source of at least a very subtle kind of suffering. So this is the Truth of Suffering, which means, we may say in short, that one will never be truly happy until one is Enlightened. Everything falls short of that.

And then *Impermanence*. Every conditioned thing is impermanent. We know that only too well. Every day, every hour, every *minute* almost, we are made conscious, we are made aware of the fact that nothing lasts, nothing stays, everything flows on, nothing remains the same even for two consecutive seconds. We are growing old all the time; things are wearing out all the time; we have to repair our houses every now and then. Everything is changing, everything is fading, nothing lasts, nothing is stable. We like to think it is, we like to think we are settled somewhere for ever, as it were, we like to think that we've got something, as it were, for ever; but this for ever that we are so fond of thinking of, this may be for a few hours, it may be for a days, a few years. It may be only for a few minutes. So this is one very important aspect of Perfect Vision as applied to mundane things: seeing clearly, seeing steadily that everything is impermanent, everything transitory, that you can't cling on to anything for very long; at the best for a little while, but in the end you have to relinquish it.

And then finally, that Conditioned Existence is *Devoid of True Selfhood*. This is a rather difficult, a rather abstruse aspect of Perfect Vision. It needs a whole lecture to itself, even a whole *series* of lectures, but we can only say at this stage in the few minutes available to us, that nowhere in conditioned existence, and in ourselves as conditioned, do we find true being, true individuality, do we find reality of any sort. If we just turn our gaze even on ourselves we become aware very often how empty, how unreal, how hollow we are. Very often we feel our thoughts are not real thoughts, our feelings are not real feelings, our emotions are not real emotions. We don't feel real ourselves, we don't feel genuine ourselves, we don't feel authentic ourselves. And we won't find genuineness or authenticity or true selfhood on the level of the mundane at all but only on the level of what we may call spiritual, or what we may call the Unconditioned, Reality.

So these three characteristics - seeing conditioned existence in these three ways - this is another aspect of Perfect Vision, another doctrinal category giving conceptual expression to our experience of Perfect Vision.

And thirdly and lastly [in the conceptual categories], a vision, we may say, of *Karma and Rebirth*. This is presented very vividly, sometimes almost pictorially, in the Buddhist Scriptures, when it's said for instance that the Buddha and other Enlightened Beings, on the night of their Enlightenment, saw passing before their eyes, as it were, a great panorama of birth and death and rebirth, not only of themselves but of other living beings, in fact of all living beings; and how they traced, how they tracked life after life, the whole process of karma - how this action led to that result, and that action led to another kind of result. They saw it, as it were clearly before their eyes. So this is another aspect of Perfect Vision.

Now all these doctrinal categories I've mentioned before; that is to say the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, The Three Characteristics of Conditioned Existence, the vision of Karma and Rebirth. All these conceptual formulations are attempts to give conceptual expression to one's vision, one's Perfect Vision, of the nature of existence - all these are doctrinal categories derived from the Hinayana, or basic Buddhism. But Perfect Vision can also be expressed, also be expounded more profoundly perhaps, in terms of the doctrinal categories of the Mahayana, the Great Way. So I'm going to close this evening with one of the most important of these, and that is the *four sunyatas*.

Sunya means empty or means void. So *sunyata* is literally emptiness or voidness, but it's really much more than that. *Sunyata* sometimes means real, sometimes means unreal. It sometimes means neither real nor unreal according to context, so it's a quite bewildering word. So let's just go through these four kinds of *sunyata*, these four kinds of emptiness or voidness, which again I must remind you are not just figments of the metaphysical imagination, not just theories, but attempts to express, to communicate conceptually, a vision, something which the Enlightened have actually seen and experienced.

First of all Emptiness of the Conditioned. The conditioned is empty. Mundane existence is empty. Empty of what? It's empty of the Unconditioned, or empty of the characteristics of the Unconditioned. It's empty of permanent happiness; it's empty of permanence, because it's impermanent; it's empty also of true selfhood or true being or reality. So we say therefore that the conditioned is empty in respect to the Unconditioned. *Samsara* is empty with regard to *nirvana*. In other words on the level of the *samsara*, on the level of the conditioned, on the level of the unreal, you will never find the real. You have to go beyond the unreal if you want to find the real. The conditioned is empty with regard to the Unconditioned. You won't find what you're looking for in this world, on the level of this world. If you're looking for happiness you won't find it. If you're looking for permanence you won't find it. If you are looking for true being you won't find it, not on the level of the conditioned, because the conditioned is empty of the characteristics of the Unconditioned.

The second kind of emptiness is the Emptiness of the Unconditioned. The Unconditioned, *nirvana*, reality if you like, is empty of the characteristics of the conditioned. That is to say in the unconditioned, in *nirvana*, you will not find unhappiness, you will not find suffering. These are characteristics of the conditioned. The Unconditioned is empty of these. So in the Unconditioned no suffering, no impermanence. It's a state beyond time, eternal. Not in the sense of being indefinitely prolonged but being above and beyond time altogether. No past, no present, no future, only one

eternal now, for ever, as it were, reverberating in the point instant of a present which is beyond the present. And in the Unconditioned also no unreality, no non-selfhood, only true being, only reality, the completely, the fully, the wholly real. If you like to use philosophical terminology, the Absolute, the One Mind of Zen, or Mind Only. One pure undifferentiated awareness with neither subject nor object in it. Pure awareness, blissful awareness, Unconditioned awareness, of Reality itself. So this is the Emptiness of the Unconditioned. That the Unconditioned is empty of everything conditioned.

So we've gone a very long way. Our vision has extended very far, but we can go still further. We haven't yet exhausted that vision.

The third kind of emptiness is Great Emptiness. And Great Emptiness, we may say, is great indeed. So far we have operated with the terms conditioned and Unconditioned, *samsara* and *nirvana*, unreality and Reality and so on - suffering and happiness, but in the Great Void all these are swallowed up. Great Emptiness is empty of the distinction between the conditioned and the Unconditioned, the real and the Unreal, and so on. Great Emptiness embraces or includes, or as I've said, swallows up all dualities whatsoever. In Great Emptiness one cannot speak of the conditioned, one cannot speak of the Unconditioned. One cannot speak of the real, one cannot speak of the unreal, one cannot speak of the individual, one cannot speak of the universal. All these differences, all these dualities are there transcended. One transcends of course also the distinction between the immanent and the transcendent. One transcends even the difference between transcending and not transcending, and this is the Great Void, this is the Great Emptiness.

So our vision has gone very far indeed. But we've farther still to go yet, because there's a fourth emptiness which is the Emptiness of Emptiness. Emptiness is itself empty. Even Great Emptiness is empty. In other words get rid of the concept of emptiness altogether, even in this subtlest form. No word, not even the word emptiness, can carry you all the way. No concept, not even the concept of Great Emptiness, can carry you all the way. In the end your vision soars beyond all these steps and you're left even bare of Emptiness itself. And this is as far as one's vision goes, and it is as far perhaps as thought and speech can go.

Now all these doctrinal categories I have mentioned, whether of the Hinayana or of the Mahayana, they're all important, they all try to give expression in their own conceptual way to that vision of the nature of existence. They help us to get a glimpse of the nature of existence, but we mustn't dwell upon them too much, otherwise there's the danger of confusing Perfect Vision with right understanding in the purely theoretical sense. And if I have done nothing else this evening I hope at least I have been able to stress this fact, that *samyag-drsti*, Perfect Vision, is a *vision*, is an insight, is a spiritual experience of the nature of existence, in accordance with which we must transform and transmute our lives, our beings at every possible level, at every possible aspect.

So in order to avoid, in concluding, with any conceptual sort of emphasis, let me close with a simile, with a comparison. Suppose we want to go on a journey. Suppose we want to climb some lofty mountain peak, whether in Wales or Scotland or Europe or even in the Himalayas, what do we do? First of all we study a map, a map of the whole countryside, map of the foothills, map of the mountain itself. This study of the map corresponds to the theoretical study of Buddhist doctrines - knowing all about the Madhyamikas and Yogacarins and the Abidharmikas and so on. But we have to start our journey, we have to get going. We have at least to get to base camp. And this corresponds to our preliminary practice of the Buddha's Teaching, our preliminary practice, our just introductory practice as it were. And eventually, as we go on our journey, we catch a glimpse one day - it may be after days, it may be after weeks, maybe even after months - we catch a glimpse of the peak to which we are travelling in the distance. We have come only a little way. We are still far from the bottom of the mountain, but in the distance we see the mountain peak, perhaps the snow peak shining afar off. It may be a score of miles, it may be a hundred, and in the Himalayas one can certainly see very far indeed, but we see it, we know it's there. We have a direct perception of it, a vision of it, even though from a very great distance. So this stage corresponds to Perfect Vision.

And we can go on from there, keeping our eyes on that peak, never losing sight of that peak, at least not for more than a few minutes. We can accomplish our journey, and the vision, the sight of that peak will give us inspiration and encouragement the whole time. We may not care - in fact we *will* not care - how long the journey, how many nights we spend on the way, how difficult the terrain, how cold or how hot it is. We may not care whether we are starving, so long as we have our eyes fixed firmly on that peak in the distance, and we know that we are getting nearer and nearer and nearer every day. And one day of course, we shall find ourselves at the foot of the peak. So this process of travelling with the peak in view, corresponds to the practice of the remainder of the Noble Eightfold Path. And eventually of course we find ourselves on the lower slopes, we climb up, eventually find ourselves on the peak itself, on those virgin snows. And this of course represents the state of Enlightenment.

So I hope that in the course of the talk this evening I've been able to give you some idea of what Right Understanding or better, *Perfect Vision* really means, as the first step, the first *anga* of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path.

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