Lecture 97: Transcending the Human Predicament

Friends,

The human mind lives in two different worlds. It lives part of the time in a world of abstract thought and it lives part of the time in a world of concrete images. It lives part of the time in a world of science, of philosophy, of systematic, rational, logical thought; and it lives part of the time in a very different world indeed, a world of poetry. It lives, again part of the time, in a world of concepts, of abstract ideas, generalizations from experience; and it lives also in a world of parables, of myths, and of symbols. Part of the time it lives in the world of the conscious, and part of the time in the world of the unconscious, even in the world of the collective unconscious.

Now so far as this present series of lectures is concerned, we've more or less left the first world behind us. We're living, or at least we've begun to live, in the second world. We've begun in the course of these lectures to live, or to begin to live, in the collective unconscious; and we're becoming, week by week, acquainted with some of the treasures that we find in the depths of that collective unconscious. And we're doing this, as you know, by way of a study - not a systematic study, a more intuitive study - of the: Parables and the Myths and the Symbols of Mahayana Buddhism in the White Lotus Sutra.

And those of you who have attended the previous two lectures will recall that they were more or less of an introductory nature. In them we tried to see the whole wood, before beginning to examine individual trees. The week before last we had something to say about the Mahayana. We saw that this word, this Sanskrit word Mahayana, means simply 'Great Way'; and that it constitutes the second great stage in the development of Buddhism in India. We saw again that while Buddhism itself is universal, while all forms of Buddhism are universal in principle, we saw that at the same time the Mahayana, the great way, is more effectively universal than some other forms, for instance than the Hinayana, the little way, the little vehicle, by which it was preceded. We saw that the Mahayana, the great way, follows not only the Buddha's verbal teaching as contained in, say, the doctrines of the Middle Way, the Eightfold Path, the Six Perfections, and so on. The Mahayana also follows the Buddha's personal living example. And because it does this, because it follows not just the verbal teaching, but also the personal example of the Enlightened Man, the Buddha himself, for this reason the Mahayana stresses both Wisdom - Transcendental Wisdom - and Compassion, universal Compassion. And it's because it stresses Compassion as well as Wisdom that it doesn't wait for people to come to it, but it goes out to them. And in going out, we saw, it learns to speak a number of different languages, and it learns to speak, as it were, not only the language of concepts, of abstract thought, of reason, but also the language of images, or if you like the language of the imagination, the language of poetry.

Now last week we were concerned with the White Lotus Sutra itself, and we came to understand that this sutra was one of the greatest and most important of all the Mahayana scriptures. Perhaps even, we saw, it has, with respect to form and content, no parallel in the religious literature of the world. Because in this White Lotus Sutra there is enacted nothing less than what we can only describe - even though the description is very provisional, tentative, and inadequate - what we can only describe as the Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment. We saw that the stage as it were of the White Lotus Sutra is conterminous with the whole universe, with the whole of space. We saw that the performance that takes place on this stage in the White Lotus Sutra lasts for hundreds of ages. We saw that the protagonist, the leading personage in the drama, is the Buddha himself, Shakyamuni; and we saw that the other actors on this stage along with him are all sentient beings, other Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Arahants, gods, human beings, and so on. And we further saw that the scenery of this great drama was and is the most magnificent. the most splendid imaginable. And we saw that the whole scene, the whole drama, the whole mystery as it were, is pervaded by a sense of the marvellous and the miraculous. And the theme of this great aeonic drama which takes place in the White Lotus Sutra, the theme of this drama is Enlightenment, not just the Enlightenment of this individual or that individual, but Cosmic Enlightenment, so that we come to understand, we come to see, come to realize, that Enlightenment is not just something achieved from time to time by fortunate individuals, strenuous individuals, on this planet. We come to see that ultimately, taking the widest possible view, the widest, the broadest possible perspective, that Enlightenment is nothing less than a vast, than a cosmic, than a universal process, a process in which eventually all life, all forms of life, will participate. And perhaps we can say, perhaps it is not too much to claim, that this great vision of the White Lotus Sutra, the vision of existence, cosmic existence, as a drama of Cosmic Enlightenment, is perhaps the greatest, the most splendid ever revealed to the eyes, to the spiritual vision of man.

Now from this week we shall be dealing with the parables, the myths, and the symbols themselves. And tonight we come to the first of the Buddha's parables, which is, you may remember, the Parable of the Burning House. And we'll be dealing with it under the title of 'Transcending the Human Predicament'; and what this means we shall see shortly.

Now this parable, the Parable of the Burning House, occurs in Chapter Three of the Sutra. You may recollect from last week that in Chapter Two the Buddha has declared his previous teaching, the teaching which he had given to his disciples up to that date, to be merely introductory. It consisted in a teaching simply of the destruction by the individual of the negative emotions within his own mind; and the Buddha now says that this is not the highest spiritual goal. There's something beyond, there's a higher, a further, a greater, spiritual achievement still. And this is what he calls the attainment of Supreme, of Perfect Buddhahood, which consists not just in the eradication of negative emotions, necessary as that may be, but in the attainment also of positive spiritual knowledge and Enlightenment, knowledge of Reality, development of Wisdom, manifestation of Compassion. And the way to attain this higher goal, this goal of Supreme Enlightenment or Perfect Buddhahood, is by following the Mahayana, the Great Way - in other words by following, by practising what is known as the Bodhisattva Ideal, living for the sake of Enlightenment, but living for it not just for the sake of one's own individual emancipation, but so as to contribute to the cosmic process of Enlightenment, the Enlightenment of all sentient beings.

Now this way, the great way, the Bodhisattva's way, the way to perfect Buddhahood, this way can be followed by anyone who wishes to follow it. They simply have to choose. They simply have to take this decision, they have to commit themselves in this way. And in fact the Buddha says that all lower spiritual ideals, all lesser paths, ultimately they all merge in this one great way. So the great way, the Mahayana, is also called the one way, *Ekayana*; and the Buddha further declares that the declaration of this one great way for all living beings, leading to supreme perfect Enlightenment, supreme perfect Buddhahood, is the sole purpose for his appearance in the world.

Now you may recollect from the summary last week that not everybody in the assembly, not all the Buddha's disciples, were able to accept this new teaching, were able to accept that there was something above and beyond the previous teaching, something that they did not know, that they had not yet learned. Some could not bear to think that they hadn't yet achieved the goal, that there was anything left to learn. So five thousand of them, thinking that they had reached the highest goal, that there must be some mistake when the Buddha said that there was another higher goal to reach, they just walked out. But after they had walked out, Sariputra, the greatest, the wisest in fact, of the disciples, he accepts this new teaching of the Buddha. And at the beginning of Chapter Three he gives expression to his great joy, his joy at being able to dedicate himself to the achievement of something higher still; and the Buddha predicts that one day in the distant future he too will become a perfect Buddha. But Sariputra goes on to explain that many of the disciples, many of the members of the assembly, are still very perplexed, so he asks the Buddha to clear up the confusion in their minds. And in response to Sariputra's request, in response to his appeal, the Buddha says that he will tell a parable. And he adds: 'Through a parable intelligent people reach understanding.' Sometimes it isn't easy to follow things when they are put in a dry, abstract, conceptual manner, but with the help of a parable, with the help of a story, much becomes clear.

So the Buddha tells the Parable of the Burning House. And of course like most parables, like most stories, it begins with 'Once upon a time'. And the Buddha says: Once upon a time there lived a great elder, and he was very very rich indeed. He was a businessman, it seems, and what we would call a multi-millionaire. And he lived in an enormous mansion; and this mansion was inhabited by hundreds of people, his servants, his dependants, and so on. But though so large and in a way magnificent, the mansion was very very old, and it was also rather tumbledown. It had lots of pillars which were partly decayed. Many of the windows were broken, and some of the floorboards were fractured, and some of the walls were crumbling. It was a real old ruin, a sort of, if you like, stately home that hadn't been kept up very well by the present owner. And that's where he lived with his dependants. And the Buddha further said that in odd holes and corners of this old, crumbling, decayed mansion there lurked all sorts of ghosts and evil spirits. So this was the scene, this was the situation.

And the Buddha further said that one day it so happened that suddenly the whole building caught fire. And because it was so old and the timbers were so dry in an instant it was all ablaze, all burning

merrily, all on fire. Now the elder apparently was safe outside, he wasn't inside the building, but his children were. He had apparently - no wives or mothers are mentioned - but he had apparently a very large number of children indeed, the sutra says up to thirty. And they were all inside, and they were all quite small, quite young. So the children playing there in the midst that burning mansion were all in danger of being burned to death. But the children were not aware of this, they didn't realize this. They hadn't had that sort of experience before, apparently, they didn't realize that they were in great danger and might die, so they made no effort to escape at all. They just carried on playing.

So the elder was very very worried, and he wondered what he should do. And at first he reflected that he was strong and able and he might be able to catch the children in his arms and carry them out of the burning mansion by main force. But reflecting a bit more he sees that this isn't really very practicable. So he eventually decides to call out to the children, to call out to them loudly and warn them of their great danger. So he does this, he calls out to the children that the mansion is on fire, you'll be burned, you'll die; come out quickly. But the children take no notice of him whatever; they're all absorbed in their games, their playing, and they don't take any notice at all of their father. They don't even know what he's talking about, what he means by the mansion being 'on fire' and their lives being in danger. They just keep on running to and fro engaged in their various games; and they just glance at their father as they run past, they don't take any serious notice of him at all.

So the father sees that there is no time to be lost, otherwise the children will all be burned, they'll perish in the fire. The house is about to crash at any moment. So he decides in desperation to have recourse to an expedient. He knows the natures of these children; he knows what they dislike, what they like, what they're fond of, what they're attracted by. And he knows that especially they're all very very fond of different kinds of toys, and he knows that different children like toys of different kinds. So again he calls out, and he calls out this time saying that he's brought for them the best and most beautiful toys that they'd ever seen. Not ordinary toys - he's brought for them carts to play with, carriages to play with, some drawn by deer, some drawn by goats, some drawn by bullocks; and they're all standing just outside the gate. So he calls out to the children: Come quickly. The toys are all there at the gate, just come out and get them.

So when the children hear these words, they're overjoyed, they're delighted, they're very eager to get the toys, very eager to get the carts, to ride in them, to play with them. So they all come rushing and tumbling helterskelter out of the burning house. And they're all so eager to get out that they're pushing and shoving one another in their eagerness. So in this way the whole thirty of them, the whole tribe, they come out, and the elder sees that they're all outside the burning house. The sutra doesn't say so, but he probably counted them, he probably knew exactly how many he had. So having ascertained that they're all there, all out in the open, he sits down with a great sigh of relief; and he's very pleased, and very happy, that all the children are safe, they've all been rescued. So as he does that the children come clamouring round him, and they start demanding their toys, their carts of various kinds. So what does the elder do? He gives each of them a magnificent cart, a magnificent carriage drawn by bullocks. He doesn't give them different carriages, carriages of different kinds, he gives them, each one, the same kind of carriage, but bigger and better and more magnificent than they could possibly have imagined in all their wildest dreams. And the sutra asks, or the Buddha asks, why does he do this? He does it because his wealth is very great, tremendous, infinite, and because he wants to give his children, of whom he's very fond, the very best that he has. So he hasn't acted deceitfully in promising them one thing and giving them something else, because it was all motivated by his desire for the welfare, the happiness, the safety and the security of the children. So this is the parable, the Parable of the Burning House.

Now in a sense the parable carries its meaning on its surface. It means just what it says, and it therefore makes, to a great extent, its own impact, and therefore, again, no explanation is required, one just has to let it all sink in. But I'd like to underline just a few points, just a few incidents in the whole parable, and then proceed to a few general considerations.

Now the first thing that people usually want to know, of course, is: who is the elder? Well, the elder is the Buddha, the Enlightened One. And the mansion in which he lived with his servants and dependants, this mansion is the world, not just this world, this earth, but the whole universe, the whole of conditioned existence itself, the whole of mundane existence if you like, all worlds. And the mansion, that is to say this world, this universe, is inhabited by all kinds of living beings, not just

human beings, but living beings of all kinds, some less developed than man, some, according to Buddhism, even more developed than man.

Now the mansion is old, and it is decayed, so what does this mean? It means that this world, this universe, is subject to all sorts of imperfections, it isn't perfect by any means. To begin with, it's impermanent, it's changing all the time, it's mutable, it's unreliable, you can't remain in it for long, you can't have any security in it. You're just a traveller. It's more like a hotel than a home. And then again the sutra mentions ghosts in the corners, and what does this mean? This means, we could say, that this world of ours, especially this world in which we live, is haunted. Haunted by what? Haunted by the past. We like to think we live in the present, but more often than not we live in the past, and the ghosts of the past are all around us. And these ghosts are our own projections from our own unconscious minds. We don't usually know that they're projections, we think that they're there, out there, that these projections are objectively existing beings, situations. But actually they all come from our own mind, all ghosts of the past that we're carrying along with us all the time, and by which only too often we are surrounded. So these are the ghosts lurking in the corners of this mansion of the world.

And then of course the mansion catches fire. It catches fire in the parable at a certain time, but in reality the mansion of the world is on fire all the time. All the time it's burning, all the time it's blazing. Now fire is a well-known symbol in Buddhism, in fact it's a symbol in Indian religion generally. Some of you may remember that not long after his Enlightenment the Buddha gave what is called the Fire Sermon, a sermon on fire. It is said that he led all his disciples to the top of a hill one night, and he addressed them, saying: The whole world is on fire. The whole world is ablaze. The whole world is burning. And with what is it ablaze, with what is it on fire, with what is it burning? And he said it's burning with the fire of craving, of neurotic desire; burning with the fire of anger, hatred, and aggression; burning with the fire of ignorance, delusion, bewilderment, confusion, unawareness. And this just wasn't an idea or a concept in the Buddha's mind. He surely saw it, as though in a vision, just like this. And it may well be that when he went to the top of this hill with his disciples, it may well be that before he spoke he had been looking out, looking down, maybe into the jungles, and it may well be that he saw there, as you can sometimes see nowadays, a forest fire burning and blazing in the distance. And then he may have seen, in his spiritual vision as it were, not just the forest burning, but the houses burning, the people burning, the mountains burning, the earth burning, the sun, the moon, the stars, everything burning, everything conditioned burning with these threefold fires of craving, of anger, and delusion.

Fire, we know, is not just even in Buddhism a negative, but also a positive symbol. Fire is associated with change; in fact fire is itself change, it's a process of combustion. And it's not just a process of change, not just a symbol of change; it's a process also of transformation, and fire is therefore in Indian thought, Indian religion, Indian spiritual life, Indian art, a symbol not just of destruction but also of renewal, of rebirth, spiritual rebirth.

Going back to Vedic times, times even before the Buddha, we know that fire was used in sacrifice. The ancient Indians, the ancient Hindus, offered sacrifice. They laid an offering, an oblation, on a specially constructed altar, an altar built of turfs or built of bricks, and that was burned, it was consumed by fire. And being consumed by fire, what happened to that offering, to that oblation? - it was transformed into smoke, and as smoke it ascended into the heavens, into the sky, ascended to the gods. In other words, with the help of fire, by means of fire, that gross offering, material offering laying on the altar, was transformed into something less gross, something subtle, into a higher form, if you like, in this case into smoke.

Similarly we find in ancient India, as in modern India, that cremation was practised, that dead bodies were not buried in the earth, were not chopped up as in Tibet into pieces, but were laid on a pyre of logs. Those logs were set fire to and the corpse was burned, reduced to ashes. And according to the Vedic, the pre Buddhistic, teaching, the physical body was reduced to ashes, but what happened to the more subtle part, to what they thought of then as the self or the soul? Well, it went either to the moon or to the sun, the ancient Indians believed. It went either to the world of the fathers, or to the world of the gods. But in any case cremation represented as it were a transformation of what was gross into something subtle.

And then again we find that traditionally in India the cremation ground, the place where corpses, where

dead bodies are burned, are cremated, the cremation ground is the abode of the god Shiva. And Shiva is the Hindu god of destruction, of death; he is the Destroyer. In Hinduism you've got three great gods, the trimurti, the three deities if you like. There's Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and then thirdly and lastly there's Shiva the Destroyer, the god of destruction, who brings everything to an end, who tramples upon the whole universe and who destroys it at the end of the kalpa, the end of the age. But Shiva is also the god of transformation, of spiritual rebirth, because before you can build up you must break down. So Shiva represents this process, this spiritual process, of breaking down and also building up; of death, destruction, and also life and spiritual rebirth.

And then again we find in Tibetan Buddhism not only peaceful deities, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas with peaceful expressions, smiling expressions. We find also what are called the wrathful deities, Buddha and Bodhisattva forms, dark blue in colour, stoutly and strongly built, with glaring eyes and long red tongues and white tusks, and clad in elephant's hides and tiger skins and dancing in fury. And we find that they are surrounded very often by a halo of flames. And what does this represent, what does this symbolize? Well, the same sort of thing. Here the flames symbolize the transformation of the gross into the subtle, the unconscious into consciousness. And the particular wrathful form, whether Buddha or Bodhisattva, represents this sort of fiery breaking through of the spirit of Enlightenment through the darkness and the ignorance of the world.

Well so much for this symbolism of fire, negative and positive. Now what about the children in the parable, what do they represent? Well, they obviously represent living beings, especially human beings, that is to say, especially ourselves. And in the context of the sutra they can be regarded as representing, especially, the Hinayana disciples, those following the lower spiritual ideals. Or generally speaking we can say they represent those who have evolved, but evolved only up to a certain point, and who have still some distance, maybe a great distance, to go.

Now the children are in danger. Human beings are in danger, we are in danger - danger, in the parable, of being burned to death. Now what does this mean? We can interpret in two different ways. Interpreting this in one way we can say that it means that people are in danger of remaining in the world, in danger of remaining within the framework, within the process, of conditioned existence, within the process, in traditional Buddhist terms, of birth and death and rebirth, as illustrated, for instance, by the Tibetan Wheel of Life. And if we remain within this framework, within this process, turning round and round in this wheel, we'll of course inevitably, at least sometimes, we must suffer.

But we can interpret it also in another way. We can interpret the danger in another way. We can say that people are in danger, that we are in danger of remaining, of as it were getting stuck in, a lower level of development, a lower level, a lower stage, of evolution. This very easily happens. It happens in the case, unfortunately, of a large number of people; and it isn't always entirely their own fault. And if we're not free to develop, if we're not free to grow, if we're cramped as it were in our growth, we can't stretch out, then inevitably we suffer. We know that the organism, both biologically and psychologically, and I would say even spiritually speaking, the organism, the human organism, has a natural tendency to grow. To grow, we may say, is the tendency, the nature, of life itself. Life in all its forms wants to unfold its inner potentialities, develop its hidden parts. But suppose any particular living thing cannot do this, well then it suffers, it feels miserable, at least feels uneasy, dissatisfied. And this is in fact what we very often find with people. The circumstances are such, the environment is such that they cannot grow, they cannot develop. They find themselves in very stultifying, in very restricting, in very constricting circumstances. They feel sometimes as though they can't even breathe, that they're pressed in upon from all sides, on all sides, by all sorts of factors, all sorts of circumstances which are not very pleasant, and which are not within their control, and about which apparently they can do very little. And these factors, these circumstances, as it were strangle them, choke them, stifle them, and make them feel that they're just not growing, they're not developing as they could, as they might, as they should develop. And this makes them feel not just frustrated and restricted, but very miserable and sometimes very annoyed and resentful and unhappy in every way.

Now in the parable, the elder, the rich old man, is the father of the children. But here there's a possibility of misunderstanding which must be cleared up. Usually of course in ordinary parlance 'father' means the progenitor of the children. So on account of the fact that in the parable the Buddha appears as the father of the children, it might be thought that the parable is suggesting that the Buddha is as it were the creator of living things, the creator of human beings, of sentient beings. In other words

it might be thought that the Buddha in the parable, in the sutra, is being represented as a sort of god who has created the world, created living beings, created men and women. But this in fact is not so. This is not the point of the comparison. It is not for this reason in the parable that the Buddha is described as the father of the children. Father here does not mean progenitor in the physical sense, it means simply, it stands simply for, someone older, more experienced, and more highly evolved. Or we could say that in the parable the Buddha is not like the biological father but like the cultural father. You may know that in some primitive cultures you have two fathers. You have your biological father who actually begot you; and you have your cultural father, who is responsible for educating you and bringing you up, who is usually your mother's brother. In modern societies, in modern communities, biological and cultural fathers are usually identical, but this isn't an invariable rule. So we say that in the parable the Buddha stands for the cultural father, not the biological father; so he's not being regarded as creator in the theistic, in the Christian sense.

Now in the parable, when he sees the fire, the elder wonders what he can do to save the children. And you may remember that he reflected that he was very strong, powerful, had very strong arms, so that he could pick the children up and carry them out of the burning house by force. But on reflection he dismissed this idea. Now what does this mean? Well, it means very clearly that however willing and able you may be, you just cannot save people, spiritually speaking, by force. You could conceivably drag someone out of a burning building even against his or her own will, but you can't make anybody evolve against their own will. Yes, you can drag them to meditation classes, you can drag them into church, you can force them to recite the words of the Creed, you can force them to read the Bible, you can force them, or intimidate them, into not doing this and not doing that; but you cannot make them evolve against their own will.

We may say that the Higher Evolution, by its very nature, is necessarily a voluntary process. It's something that you must do yourself because you yourself want to do it. And this is sometimes forgotten. Sometimes you find even religious people, even spiritual people, saying, referring to other people, that what they really need to make them develop and to grow spiritually is discipline. Sometimes you find this statement made. And you can certainly find some teachers who are ready to impose discipline, even very strict discipline, who give you a very tough time indeed. And you can find again plenty of people who are ready to accept discipline of this sort; and indeed it isn't difficult to condition people by various means along certain lines. But this conditioning, we may say, is a very different thing from real spiritual development.

So Buddhism does not force, it does not compel, it does not intimidate; and it doesn't have recourse to discipline in this sort of almost military sense of the term, because it knows that forcing people to develop, or trying to do so, would only defeat its own ends. So Buddhism therefore throughout its history from the very beginning has tried only to persuade and to convince, and for this reason Buddhism is very tolerant. It has never tried to force anybody to do anything, hasn't tried to force anybody to be a Buddhist or follow Buddhism, or practise meditation, or be a Bodhisattva, or anything else of that sort.

So the elder therefore, in the end, having given up the idea of removing the children by force, calls out to them. He calls out. Now this call of the elder, in fact this whole symbolism of the call, is full of meaning. And what does it represent, that the elder calls to the children? The call represents the call of truth; it represents the call, if you like, of the divine, represents the call which most people hear at some time or other in their lives, either when they're very quiet and out in the country, or after some very tragic experience, or after a long and rather weary experience of life perhaps, when they've got rather fed up with it all, or maybe through great art or great literature - they hear the call. They hear the voice as it were of something beyond. If you like, they hear without hearing, they hear what has sometimes been called the voice of the silence. But having heard this voice, this call, even heard it very clearly, what usually happens unfortunately is that we ignore it. We go on living and working and enjoying ourselves as though we had never heard that voice, never heard that call. Sometimes we try to pretend to ourselves that we didn't really hear it all, that it was just our imagination, that we dreamt about it. There was no call, no voice. Because vaguely the idea that there might have been a voice, there might have been a call, rather worries us, we feel rather afraid perhaps, because we don't know where the call is coming from. It comes from some very far mysterious region that we've no acquaintance with, and we don't know where the call, where the voice, is calling us to. We think we may have to give up all sorts of things if we want to follow that voice, follow that call; and we don't want to give

them up, we don't want to go away to explore unknown territory.

Now we find, turning from the Buddhist to the Hindu tradition again, we find in medieval Hinduism that we have the very beautiful symbolism of what is called Krishna's flute. Krishna is one of the great spiritual figures of Hinduism. Traditionally he's an incarnation of the god Vishnu the Preserver, he's a sort of semi-divine figure, a demi-god, in fact, and all sorts of myths and legends are related about him. And the scene, in the case of Krishna's flute, the scene is a spot, a region near Delhi, which is called Brindaban. And in the case of Brindaban the scene is night, and very dark night, night when there is no moon and the whole village, the whole village of Brindaban, where the people are all cowherds and cowgirls, where they live by agriculture and pasture, the whole village is sound asleep. So you can just imagine this scene. It's a very beautiful scene, this countryside with just little mudwalled huts with their thatched roofs, and the cowstalls with the cows all locked up for the night, and the fields and the trees and the forest all sound asleep in the depths of the dark night, everybody sound asleep. And suddenly in the midst of the darkness, in the midst of the silence, from a far distance, from the depths of the forest, there is a sound, a very sweet sound, a very faint sound, but a very shrill, very penetrating sound, that seems to come from an infinitely remote distance. And this is the sound of a flute. And even now in India you can sometimes have this experience. You can be all by yourself, all alone in the midst of the countryside, and no-one anywhere near apparently for hundreds of miles; and it's all completely dark and completely silent, and suddenly in the distance you hear the sound of a flute. So this is what happened in this case. From the distance, the depths of the forest, the sound of the flute.

So what happens then? In a number of the huts the wives of the cowherds - they're called gopis, which means, they're usually translated as 'cowgirls', which doesn't sound very graceful or elegant, but in Sanskrit and Hindi 'gopi' sounds very graceful and elegant and feminine indeed - some of the gopis, the cowgirls, they wake up. Though the sound of the flute is very faint and very distant, it's as though they've been expecting it, so they wake up, and they know that the flute is calling them. They know that Krishna is calling them. So what do they do? They get up and very quietly, without making any sound, without telling anybody, they steal out of their houses, they steal out into the streets of the village, and off they go into the forest. And the myth says, the legend says, that they leave their husbands, they leave their children, they leave their pots and their pans, they leave their cows and their goats, and they all go stealing off, rushing off eventually, to dance with Krishna in the depths of the forest.

So here Krishna of course is a symbol of the divine; and the gopis, the cowgirls, represent the human heart, or human soul, if you like. And the sound of the flute, Krishna's flute, represents the call of the divine sounding from the very depths of existence.

So in the Buddhist tradition in the parable, the Parable of the Burning House in the White Lotus Sutra, the elder calls. He calls to the children. We hear as it were the voice of the divine. But the children take no notice. We ignore that call. And why? The sutra says, or the Buddha says in the parable, and we can imagine him saying this with a smile: Because they are absorbed in their games. We don't hear the call, the call of the divine, because we are absorbed in our games. And this is the condition of most of us. We're absorbed in our games, absorbed, we may say, in the games people play - games of all sorts, all sorts of fascinating little games, psychological games, spiritual games, cultural games, social games, that we're playing at least much of the time. Little games of success, little games of prestige, little games of popularity, little ego trips, little power trips, and so on. And we're busy playing these little games, so even though we hear the call of the divine, nothing less than that, the voice of the Buddha, Krishna's flute, we find our little games much more interesting, much more fascinating, much more absorbing, so we just go on playing. And here at this point the parable, the sutra, adds some very perceptive touches. It says that the children at this stage run to and fro. They're not only playing their games, they're running to and fro. So what does this mean? It means that we're very restless. We can't stay anywhere for long. We can't stay with anything for long. We can't even spend much time with one game, we even want to change our games, or change our partners, in more ways than one. So we not only play games but we go running backwards and forwards in desperation. So this is our situation. And also the sutra says the children glance at their father. They've heard him calling, and they're ignoring it, but still, as they run past they just glance at him. Now what does this mean? This means that here we are, playing our little games, running here and there, running to and fro, all restless, all excitable, all changeable, but we do give the odd glance in the direction of religion, just the odd glance in the midst of our little games and so on.

So what is the elder to do? The children won't heed his call, they go on playing their little games. What is he to do? Force is out of the question; and the children fail to respond to a direct appeal. So the elder has got no alternative but to have recourse to a trick - that's the plain word for it, a trick. The technical Buddhist word is *upaya kausalya*, skilful means. Now the elder in the parable knows that the children are very fond of toys. So he decides to get them out of the burning house by promising toys, especially the carts, you remember, the deer carts, goat carts, bullock carts - and these, with the help of which, or by promising which he does get the children out of the burning house, are of course the vehicles or the yanas. And in the context of Buddhism these different carts or vehicles stand for the three yanas about which we heard last week, that is to say the *Sravakayana*, *Pratyekabuddhayana*, and the *Bodhisattvayana*; or they stand, that is to say broadly speaking, for different spiritual ideals - for the Arahant ideal, the ideal of private Enlightenment, and the Bodhisattva Ideal. Or, less technically, they stand for different formulations of the Buddha's teaching, or even if you like different sectarian forms of Buddhism. And these are adapted, these different forms are adapted, to the needs of different temperaments, different dispositions.

Now there are several perceptive touches here too. The sutra says, or the parable says, that, hearing their father's promise of giving them all these marvellous toys, the children rush out eagerly. When he just says: 'Come out', they don't take any notice, but when they're promised toys, toys of different kinds: 'I shall have this kind of toy, you will have that kind of toy', then out they come rushing. And this suggests that a subjective and sectarian approach, as it were, is for many people more attractive than an objective, more universal approach. And we often do find this in practice. We find that the more exclusive forms of religion often have a much stronger, more powerful emotional appeal. If you stand up and say: 'Well, this is the truth. I've got the truth, my religion has got the truth, my teaching has got the truth. There's no truth anywhere else to be found, the truth is found only here' - you're much more likely to get a following among ordinary people than if you say: 'Well look, this is how I see it. Other people see it differently, but we're maybe all right from our different points of view. Let's go forward together' - if you say that sort of thing, you probably attract far fewer ordinary people. And we therefore find that those forms of Buddhism which in the course of Buddhist history down to the present have become rather exclusive, at least exclusive for forms of Buddhism, they have, for many people at least, a stronger appeal. It's perhaps not without significance that the Mahayana in general, the most lofty and universal of all forms of Buddhism, has as such hardly any following in this country, perhaps only in our own Movement to some extent.

Now even fewer people, we may say, are able to appreciate the much broader, much more universal concept of the Higher Evolution itself. This is a concept to which very few people apparently, even when they hear it, can really rise. Now the sutra also says, the parable also says, that in their eagerness to get the toys, to get their own particular cart, the children come out pushing one another. So what does this represent? They practise intolerance. You're all trying to get out of the same house, all trying to get to the same sort of toy, broadly speaking, so instead of going out as it were in order, side by side or hand in hand, you rush out only thinking of getting your toy, and you knock and jostle and push others who are doing the same thing and going in just the same direction. You may not, at least if you're a Buddhist, you may not actually persecute anybody, but you may not have very friendly positive feelings towards other people following different paths.

Now once the children are all outside, what does the elder do? The elder gives each of them the very best kind of carriage. If you like he gives them one and the same carriage, bigger and better than anything they could ever have imagined. So what does this mean? It means that once, or it means, we may say, the closer people come to the goal, then the more do their paths converge. We start off in all sorts of ways, start off on the process of the spiritual life or the Higher Evolution in all sorts of ways. Some start by being interested, say, in the fine arts or in music, or poetry. Others may be interested say in social service; others may come through meditation, others because they're trying to resolve pressing psychological problems, others again may be attracted through Zen, others again attracted through, say, the Theravada. And this diversity is only natural, because we start off with so many different temperaments, with so many different personal idiosyncrasies, and we're naturally attracted at the beginning by different things. But gradually a change takes place. As we get more and more deeply into our chosen subject, we understand it better. We understand its true nature. We become aware of what it is doing to us. We realize that we are changing, that we are developing, through our participation in this particular subject, through our interest in it, our preoccupation with it. And we find that our idiosyncrasies of temperament, even those which led us to that particular subject, are gradually being

resolved. And in the end we realize that art in all its forms, religion in all its forms, and so on, are all means for evolution, for the Higher Evolution of humanity, and that by participating in them, by participating in any of them, we ourselves are evolving, and that others too are evolving, even though their initial approach and their special preoccupation is different from our own, we realize that we're all evolving together, we're participating in the same general process, the process of the Higher Evolution of man, or the process of Cosmic Enlightenment.

We may say that in terms of Buddhism, the Parable of the Burning House asserts that all the sects and schools of Buddhism merge ultimately into the one great way to Enlightenment, or one great way to Perfect Buddhahood. Or in more general terms we may say that the parable asserts that all the higher cultural and spiritual interests of humanity merge into one great process of the Higher Evolution of Man.

Well, so much for the meaning of specific details of the parable. It's time we passed on now to a few general considerations, also dealt more explicitly with the title of the lecture, and then we have to conclude.

Now the general considerations relate to four topics, and these are:

1) Whether the parable teaches escapism.

2) Whether it teaches universalism

3) Whether sectarianism is necessary, and,

4) The situation today.

So first of all, does the Parable of the Burning House teach escapism? Well, at first sight it does, because the elder urges the children to escape from the burning house, that's his sole concern, that they should escape from the burning house. So the meaning is quite clear. Now some people would say that this sort of approach, this idea of escape, is typical of religion in general. They would say that religion urges us to escape from the world, not only that, but to run away from the problems of the world, even from our own problems. And some again would say that this criticism applies with greater justice to the Eastern religions, especially to Buddhism. They're very fond of pointing out how the Buddha left his own wife and child, how he escaped, as it were, from his responsibilities and obligations. And they say that the criticism doesn't apply to Christianity. They say, some of these people, that Christianity, unlike Buddhism, remains with the world and struggles with the world, tries to transform it, tries to make it into a better place, tries to help the sick and care for the needy. But, they say, what do Buddhists do? Buddhists don't do anything at all, they just sit and meditate, ignoring all the sins and sufferings of the world, and that is pure escapism. This is a common criticism that one can still find made in quite respectable quarters. So this is the indictment.

But one can say at once that there's nothing wrong in escaping. The whole criticism proceeds on the assumption that to escape is somehow morally wrong. But suppose, let us say, we are trapped quite literally in a burning house. Suppose the fire brigade arrives, and suppose one allows oneself to be rescued, either by jumping out of a window into a net, or by being carried down the fire escape by some stalwart fireman; and suppose afterwards one's friends say: 'You shouldn't have done that. That's sheer escapism.' Well, that would be absolutely ridiculous. So Buddhism simply says, or rather it simply sees, that there's a certain objective situation of pain and suffering, or if you like of limitation, of imperfection, of frustration, and it just says: Get out of it. Escape from it. So this isn't escapism, this is simply acting realistically, just like getting out of that burning building. At the same time one must confess that 'escape' is not a very good word; nowadays it has a bad reputation, a rather unpleasant connotation. So perhaps it would be better to speak of 'transcending'.

So the burning house in the parable represents not just suffering in the literal sense. We may say it represents the limitations of human existence, the conditions under which we have to live and function. We may say therefore that it represents, the burning house in the parable represents, the human predicament, the predicament in which we find ourselves as human beings. And the title of the lecture therefore speaks of Transcending the Human Predicament, and this is really what the parable is all

about. It shows us how we can escape, or better, transcend, or better still, shows us how we can grow, how we can develop, grow from a lower, less satisfactory state of existence, symbolized by the burning house, to a higher, more satisfactory state of existence, symbolized by being outside the burning house. The sutra shows us, or the parable shows us, we may say, how, by following one or another special cultural or spiritual interest, we can come eventually into the mainstream of the Higher Evolution of Man.

Now this is not to say that there's no such thing at all as escapism. We must understand what it really is, what it really consists in. We may say that this process of growth and development and evolution, of which we've spoken, requires effort, requires exertion, requires determination; but not everybody's prepared to make that sort of effort. So we may that if there is such a thing as escapism, then escapism means trying to get away from situations in which one is required to make an effort to grow, to get away from that situation to one where one is not required to make an effort to grow. So escapism we can say is regression; it's returning to an earlier, easier stage of one's existence and development. Escapism therefore is stagnation, and it's true that religion is sometimes escapism, and people's religious life is escapism - this, unfortunately, is sometimes true. But it's less true now, we may say, than formerly, because religion itself is much less widespread than formerly. And we can therefore say that nowadays it's the non-religious activities that provide, usually, the means of our escapism. We can say that for many many people politics are escapism, social work is escapism, even personal relationships are escapism. Watching television is escapism. Reading is escapism. Sex is escapism. Even the arts may be escapism. And work, for many people, can be escapism. And we can summarize all this by saying that a life, any kind of life, any form of life, that is making no effort, no positive deliberate effort to evolve, is escapism. So one can even say that escapism is the rule rather than the exception. But religion does not teach escapism, and Buddhism certainly does not teach escapism, nor the Parable of the Burning House. Religion in general, Buddhism especially, and certainly the Parable of the Burning House, teach growth, development, evolution.

Now our remaining general considerations won't keep us quite so long. So secondly, does the Parable of the Burning House teach universalism? Well, at first sight it appears to do so. It says that the distinction between the yanas is illusory, in reality there's only one Yana. But what is universalism? - what does this say, what does this teach? Universalism is usually understood as saying that all religions teach the same thing and that therefore there's no difference between them whatsoever. And universalism usually tries to equate specific doctrines, saying that they differ only in words, in substance they're the same. So universalism usually takes say this doctrine from that religion, and this doctrine from another religion, and compares them saying well they're the same teaching, the same doctrine, just put in different words. And it tries to work out a sort of wholesale system of equations, that this in this religion corresponds to that in another religion. In Christianity you've got say the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Well in that case in Buddhism you've got the *Trikaya* - the *Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, Nirmanakaya*. In Hinduism you've got *Trimurti - Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesvara*. So the first all correspond, the second all correspond, the third all correspond, and therefore they all say the same thing. This is universalism, this trying or this effort to equate specific doctrines and teachings in this way in a wholesale sort of manner. And this of course often leads to very forced interpretations.

But the Parable of the Burning House doesn't teach universalism in this sense. It certainly doesn't say that all the yanas teach the same thing. It doesn't say that all religions teach the same thing, because obviously they teach different things, so that no wholesale intellectual doctrinal equation is possible. But what the parable does maintain very definitely is that all the yanas are part of the same stream of tendency, as we may say, to use the expression of Matthew Arnold's. They're all heading ultimately in the same direction. But there are still many differences. Among others, some religions are more advanced than others; universal religions are more advanced than the ethnic religions and so on. Again we may say that universalism is a static sort of teaching, whereas the teaching of the Parable of the Burning House is much more dynamic. Universalism relies on intellectual resemblances, but the parable relies on the unity of the evolutionary process itself. Moreover we can say that universalism maintains that all religions are true, and all totally true in all parts, whereas Buddhism would say that there are some so-called religious teachings, teachings which pass current as religious but which are not true, are not therefore really religious at all. For instance, it would mention the orthodox Christian doctrine of eternal punishment for some people.

Now thirdly, is sectarianism necessary? We saw that the Buddha taught different yanas, or formulated his teaching in different ways, and he did this of course for a definite reason, he did it on account of the different temperaments of his disciples. First he gave a more elementary teaching, later he gave a more advanced teaching. First he taught several yanas, and later he taught just one yana only. Now we may ask: Is this an invariable process? Do we have to be sectarian first, follow this particular teaching, this particular path, believing that this is the only one, and all the others are wrong, and then later on, later on in our lives or our spiritual experience, come to a broader view and a broader outlook, a universal approach without being universalistic. In other words, is sectarianism a necessary stage in our development?

Now we may say that formerly this might have been the case. And we mustn't forget that the Buddha taught orally. There was no writing, or not much writing in his day, at least not for religious purposes, so he could give his disciples verbally, orally, what they needed just as they needed it. And the disciples of course had no access to general religious literature. They certainly didn't go to other teachers, and they knew only what the Buddha taught them from time to time.

And in the same sort of way we find that in later times, later on in the history of Buddhism, and the history of religion generally in the world, we find that it's possible for different forms of teaching to exist independently in different places, in different parts of the world, even different parts of the same country. So therefore it was possible geographically and culturally to follow one teaching or one sect exclusively, ignoring all the others. And we know of course it was like that with regard to the different religions. Until very recently you could be a Christian in the West and not need to know anything about Buddhism or Hinduism in the East; and you could be a Buddhist in the East and you'd never hear the name of Christianity from one year's end to another - it was quite as it were irrelevant.

But we must realize that the situation has now changed. The world is a very different sort of place. Now the situation is that everybody can study everything. All the religious literature is available, all the spiritual teachings are available. Anybody who runs, as the saying is, can read. And it's no longer possible, in any case, to keep people away from a teaching for which they are not ready. This gives rise to problems of its own. People get hold of all sorts of teachings which, because they're not spiritually developed enough, they cannot but misunderstand and misinterpret. But this is unavoidable, it can't be helped. We find, broadly speaking, we may say, that the world is becoming a smaller place, due to improved communication, transport; and this means that all religions, even all sects, are increasingly tending to be found everywhere, so that it's no longer really possible to follow any one, ignoring, or pretending to ignore, all the others. At least we'll know about them from literature, or from hearsay.

So what should be done in this sort of situation? I personally think there's only one thing that can be done - that religion in general should place, as it were, all its cards on the table, should see, or try to see, the Parable of the Burning House in its universal perspective, should recognize that all the yanas etc. are different ways, different stages, different aspects, of one and the same path, which is the path to Enlightenment, the path to Perfect Buddhahood, the path of the Higher Evolution of Man.

But you may ask: what about differences of temperament? Can we forget about these? Is it that they will no longer exist? Well, no. Differences of temperament are certainly still there. But it would seem that sectarianism, in the bad old sense, is no longer necessary to cater to them, to these differences of temperament. It's quite enough, so far as difference of temperament is concerned, if there's just an appropriate difference of our actual method of spiritual practice, say our method of meditation. We don't need, in order to satisfy our particular temperamental needs, we don't need to belong to a whole sectarian organization excluding all the others. We can even say that the greater part of sectarianism is just not necessary at all. Sectarianism expresses for the most part merely negative emotions, and it's time that we got rid of it almost entirely.

So far as we are concerned, so far as the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order are concerned, our own Movement is Buddhist but it's non-sectarian. We don't say that we follow Theravada, we don't say that we follow Zen or any other of the schools, we don't even say that we follow the Mahayana; we say that we're just Buddhist. And even Buddhism we interpret very broadly; we interpret it as whatever conduces to the Enlightenment of the individual, and this is of course the Buddha's own criterion. And it's because he gives his criterion that we follow the Buddha in particular rather than anybody else; because the Buddha alone apparently among religious teachers seems to have understood what religion

was really all about, that it's a process of evolution and development of the individual - and it's in this sense that we're Buddhist rather than, for instance, Christian.

Now we do find in the West, unfortunately, some Buddhist groups that are rather sectarian. This is a great mistake and a great pity, and we hope that they will eventually be absorbed into the mainstream.

Now fourthly and lastly, the situation today. The situation today is that the burning house is burning more merrily than ever. I need not go into details; we've only got to open our newspapers or turn on the radio any day of the week, and we know that the burning house is burning and blazing more merrily than ever before. So the whole question of escape or, to use a better word, the whole question of transcendence, of growth, of development into a higher state, into a higher stage, becomes more urgent than ever, both for the individual singly, and for the individual as a member of a spiritual community. And we know that conventional religion as it has come down to us so far is no longer very helpful or very useful; and even we may say that traditional Eastern Buddhism is no longer very helpful or useful also, even in the East.

But at the same time we must say that there's no reason for us to despair. It's always darkest, they say, before the dawn; and potentially at least we are on the threshold of what we may venture to describe as a new age, an age when the world will be one world, when there'll be a single world community, a single common human culture to which all existing cultures will contribute their best, when there'll be one universally recognized goal for every human individual, Enlightenment, when there'll be one universally recognized way to follow, the way, simply, of the Higher Evolution. But this new age, we have to realize, will not come to pass automatically. It depends on individual human effort. It will come to pass only to the extent that the individual human being tries to grow.

The Parable of the Burning House, we may say, points in the direction of the new age. It shows us how even here, even now, we can transcend the human predicament.