

Lecture 98: The Myth of the Return Journey

There are many sayings that have come down to us from the past. Sayings of ancient sages, ancient wise men of both the East and the West and one of these sages, one of these wise men once asked the question, 'what was the strangest and the most wonderful thing in the whole world?' And he answered his own question, he said that the strangest, the most wonderful thing in the whole world was man himself, or if you like the strangest and most wonderful thing in the whole world was human life, human existence. And we may say that there are quite a number of reasons why human life, human existence should be distinguished, should be singled out, as it were, in this way. In the first place, human life is a very deep, a very mysterious thing. It isn't very easy to fathom, isn't very easy to understand. It is, as it were, many-faceted. It has many different aspects, it's a very complex phenomenon, and it's therefore possible to look at it in all sorts of different ways. And because it has so many different aspects, because it's possible to look at it in so many different ways, it's also possible to represent it, to represent human life, in a multitude of forms, under the guise of many different symbols, even many different similes, many different figures of speech. And all these symbols, all these similes in terms of which we represent or embody life as seen from one or another point of view, one or another angle of human vision, all these, all these symbols, all these similes are capable of expansion, we may say capable of almost indefinite expansion. They can be expanded into grandiose myths, into inspiring legends, into fascinating, into enthralling, stories, and these myths, these legends, these stories, in turn can crystallize, as it were, into works of art, works of literature, can crystallize into epic poems, into novels, into dramas; and of course they can also crystallise, also condense, into what we call parables. And we may say that many of the greatest masterpieces of world literature, some of the most famous works of world literature, are of this kind. Their subject is none other than human life itself, and they represent, their purpose, their function, if you like, is to represent human life itself from a certain point of view, from a certain angle of vision. And these works, these great works of literature, ancient and modern, they represent human life, or even life in general, in terms of a symbol, in terms of a certain simile, a certain figure of speech, and it's for this reason they are of universal interest, and it's for this reason that they're still read and eagerly read even after the passage of hundreds or thousands of years.

Let me give a few examples of the sort of thing I mean. We can think, for instance, of human life, of human existence, in terms of conflict. We can think of it in terms of warfare, because looked at from a certain point of view, looked at from a certain angle of vision, life, human life is a battle, and battle is a symbol of human life itself. And this is the point of view, or if you like the vision, of some of the greatest and most famous works of literature in the whole world, in both East and West. If we turn to Greece, Ancient Greece, Classical Greece, what do we find there? We find there a great and a famous work, Homer's *Iliad*, and the story of Homer's *Iliad* is the story of the battle between the Greeks and the Trojans for the possession of Helen, Helen of Troy. And in this great battle. in this great war, even the gods and goddesses, divine celestial beings according to Homer, are also involved. So this is the *Iliad*, the story of a battle. And then if we go further East, if we go to India, to India of the time of the Buddha or maybe a bit later, we find another great epic poem, perhaps not as great from a literary point of view as the *Iliad*, but very very much longer, and this is the *Mahabharata* of the great poet and sage Byasa. And this also describes, episode by episode, a battle, describes the great battle between the Karavas on the one hand and the Pandavas on the other for the possession of their ancestral kingdom, the two parties being cousins.

And if again we come back to the West, if we go up to Northern Europe, there we discover that great anonymous Anglosaxon epic of *Beowulf*, and this too deals with a battle, it deals with a battle between the hero, Beowulf on the one hand, and on the other the fiendish monster Grendel, his still more terrible mother, and finally the dragon. And coming to modern times, comparatively modern times, coming to the seventeenth century in England we come to one of the very greatest of all poems, epic poems, Milton's *Paradise Lost*; and this too, in great part, describes a battle, this time a battle between God and Satan, or rather between Satan and the Messiah.

So in all these works, from Homer's *Iliad* down to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, existence, including human existence, is seen in terms of conflict, in terms of warfare. Life is a battle. It's a battle between right and wrong; it's a battle between darkness and light; it's a battle between heaven and hell; it's a battle between conscious and unconscious. And the battlegrounds, where is that? The battleground is the human heart itself.

Again we can see human existence in other terms, by means of another symbol, as it were. We can see this time human existence as a riddle, as a mystery, life is a problem. And this is the way in which, for example, the Book of Job in the Bible sees it. Job had been brought up to believe that God rewarded the good for their virtue and punished the bad, punished the wicked, even here in this life itself; but then the just man suffers. Job himself suffers, but he's conscious of no sin, no evil in himself, but it seems that God is punishing him and not the unjust man. The unjust man, he says, flourishes like the green baytree. It's the just man who seems to be ground to dust. So Job wants to know why, what is the reason for this, that makes human life seem a problem and a riddle. This is also the way in which Shakespeare sees life in *Hamlet*. Hamlet utters the famous words, 'To be or not to be', or, as some people have suggested would be more appropriate, to do or not to do; that is the question, or that is the problem. Life itself has become a problem.

There are many other ways of viewing human existence, and therefore there are many other symbols and many other similes, but perhaps we can say that the most important and the most popular of them all is the symbol or the simile of the journey. Life is not only a battle, it's not only a problem: life is a journey, or, if you like, life is a pilgrimage. It's a journey, a pilgrimage, which starts from the cradle and ends at the side of the grave, it's a journey from innocence to experience, from the depths to the heights of existence, and, in *Upanishadic* words, from darkness to light, from death to immortality. And this is the vision of life that we see in a very great number of works of literature indeed, life as a journey, human life as a journey, as a pilgrimage. And if we mention even a few of these great works of literature which are based upon this sort of symbols, this sort of simile, then it sounds almost like a roll call of famous names; there's the *the Odyssey*, that's a journey, there's *the Divine Comedy*, that's a journey, there's *Monkey*, that's a journey, there's *Pilgrim's Progress*, that's a journey, there's *Wilhelm Meister*, that's a journey, there's *Peer Gynt*, that's a journey - the list is endless. Life is seen in all these works, under the symbol, under the similitude of a journey.

And life is seen as a journey also in various myths, and various legends, and various parables, and this brings us to tonight's subject which is the Myth, or the Parable if you like of the Return Journey. And this is the second of the parables of the White Lotus Sutra, and it occurs in chapter four of that work. And in chapter four, this parable is related not by the Buddha himself, not by the Shakyamuni, but by four great elders headed by Mahakasyapa. You may remember from previous weeks that these four great elders, headed by Mahakasyapa have heard Sariputra's prediction to Perfect Buddhahood. They have heard the Buddha tell everybody that Sariputra is now so far advanced on the path that he is sure, his is almost destined to reach the end, to reach the goal, to reach the very highest goal of all, which is not just emancipation from one's own individual sin and suffering but Buddhahood, Supreme Enlightenment itself. And these four great elders headed by Mahakasyapa are, they say, amazed and delighted to learn that there is a further and a higher goal of the spiritual life, namely Buddhahood, the existence of which they had not before suspected. And therefore they say they feel as though they had quite unexpectedly acquired an invaluable, a priceless jewel, and in they all together in unison, in chorus if you like give expression to their feelings in a parable.

They say that there was a certain man, and he left his father and he went away. In the East of course you usually live with your parents, with your father and your mother, but here only the father is mentioned. So they said a certain man left his father and went away. And he went away into a distant country. And in that distant country he lived many years. The text, which after all is an Indian text, says he lived there fifty years, which is quite a long time, but perhaps that isn't to be taken too literally. And while the son was away, far away all those years the father didn't remain idle. Apparently he was a businessman, so he set to work, engaged in various trading ventures, and eventually he became very rich. He also in fact was moving around from place to place, and eventually settled in another country, all the time growing richer and richer and richer.

But the son didn't do so well. Apparently he hadn't inherited his father's brains. Just a few weeks ago I was reading a very interesting report, a report into the intelligence of the children of above-average intelligence parents. And apparently this report had discovered, or the people making the report discovered, that if you are as a parent of more than average intelligence, that your children will probably be not nearly so intelligent as you. They will tend to revert to average. And in the same way, if you are as a parent of below average intelligence, then your children will tend to be around average, they will tend to be more intelligent than you. So this maybe explains quite a number of things in our

social and cultural life, but we're not going into that now. But maybe that sort of thing was noticeable even in ancient times. Whereas the father, due to his intelligence and drive, grew rich, the son all those years remained miserably poor. Not only was he poor but he was living in a very - despicable, one might even say - a very despicable sort of way, just roaming around searching for the bare necessities of life, doing a job here and a job there, just for the sake of food and clothing. That was all he ever had, food and just the clothes he stood up in.

But all this time the father was just heaping up riches. The text gives a very lavish sort of description - the father apparently was heaping up gold and silver and jewels and grain, and he had lots of slaves and menservants and womenservants and workmen and journeymen, and he even had lots of elephants, (because in the East, in India and Ceylon, if you possess elephants, well, you really are rich), and horses and cows and carriages and sheep, and also lots of dependants and followers, because in the East even now if you get even a little money together all sorts of people start gathering and clustering around you - you have a whole string of dependants and parasites really quickly. And this man's business activities apparently spread far and wide, and the text concludes a very graphic description of his activities by saying that he does great things in business, moneylending, agriculture, and commerce, ending the description in this way with a sort of flourish. So that the father became, we may say, a sort of merchant prince of the old type, and lived in the old traditional style.

But all the time, the parable says, or the elders say, all the time, despite his growing wealth, despite all his business activities, the father was all the time thinking of his son, not only thinking of his son, but he was feeling very sad, very sorrowful, he was pining for his son, he wanted very very much to see his son again, to know how he was. Not only that, but he was reflecting that the years are going by, and every year I'm getting older and older and older, and I'd like before I die to hand over all my riches, all that I've gathered, all that I've accumulated, all that I've earned, I'd like to hand all this over to my son, to my only son.

But the son meanwhile has just been roaming from place to place to place, from this town, we're told, to the next, from this district to the next, this kingdom to the next. So he was roaming far and wide. But eventually it so happened that in the course of his wanderings, quite by accident, without any intention on his part, he came to the place where his father was living, where he had settled down, but of course he didn't know that his father was at that time living there. And as he was passing, or rather skulking, through the streets keeping a lookout for the odd job so he could get a few coppers together and buy some food, he saw an enormous house, an enormous mansion in fact, and sitting in the door he saw what seemed to be a very rich man. He was surrounded by an enormous company of people all waiting on him, or waiting for him. Some had bills in their hands and others had great bundles of money that they wanted to give him, and others had presents and maybe some had bribes. And they were all standing around, and this rich man was sitting in the gateway on a magnificent throne, and even the footstool, we're told, was ornamented with gold and silver, and he was handling, so the text says, millions of gold pieces, sort of running his fingers through them, apparently, and someone was standing behind him fanning him with a chari, that is to say with a yak's tail, which in India is one of the symbols of royalty and divinity, so you would only be fanned with a chari if you were a very, very rich man indeed and had been exalted practically to the plane of divinity. Not only that, but he was sitting under a magnificent canopy, a canopy of silk, and this canopy was inlaid with pearls and flowers, and was hung all round with garlands of jewels. So he really was a magnificent sight. And in the East, of course, even today in some areas, rich people do make this sort of public display of their wealth - it's sort of expected of them.

So when the poor man saw this, when he saw this rich man seated there on his throne, in his gait, in all this sort of state, he was terrified, very very afraid. He thought that he'd come upon maybe the king, or at least some great nobleman, and he thought: Well, there's no place for me here. I'd better be off. I am much more likely to find food and clothing, he thought, in the streets of the poor, and in any case if I stay I may be forced to do forced labour. You can get an idea from this passage of the social and political conditions of the time. So he therefore hurried off to escape. Of course, he doesn't recognize his own father in that rich man.

But the father, however, recognizes him. So many years have gone by, and he's much older, he's dirty, he's wearing miserable clothes, covered with dust, but as he stands there gazing at the rich man, the rich

man, the father, recognizes him. At first sight, we are told, he knows: That is my son. He recognizes him instantly. And he feels very very happy, he feels really overjoyed that after all these years, thirty, forty, fifty years it must be, and at last my son has come back to me. Now, he thinks, I can die in peace. There's nothing more left for me to do - just hand over all my riches to him and die happily, knowing that he is all right, and that he will inherit all my wealth. So he calls two or three servants, and he says: Run after that poor man who was standing there just now, and bring him back.

So the messengers go running off after him. But the poor man becomes more terrified than ever. He thinks that they've been sent to seize hold of him, to arrest him, that he's probably going to be dragged to the place of execution and have his head cut off. So he's so afraid, so terrified, that he falls to the earth in a dead faint, he passes out. So the father of course, the rich man, is rather surprised, but anyway he tells the messengers to let the poor man alone, and he realizes that the poor man is very low-minded, one may say, that he's not used to be in contact with the rich and the powerful, and he comes to realize that though he is his son there's a tremendous psychological difference between them, because he's been living in riches all these years and the son has been living in poverty, in a very low and humble sort of way indeed. But all the same he feels: Well this is my son, never mind. However low he might have sunk, he's still my own son. But he thinks that, the situation being as it is, it would be better if he didn't tell anybody that that was his son, better if he just left things as they were for the time being.

So after a while he calls another servant, and he says: Go to that poor man, the one who's just fainted and who's just recovered, and you tell him he's free to go wherever he likes, he can just be off. So when the poor man heard that, he could hardly believe his ears, could hardly believe his good luck, so off he went without any delay, and he found his way into the poorest quarter of the town, and he hunted around again in search of food and clothing.

Well, the rich man now has recourse to a trick. He calls two more of his men, and he chooses them very carefully. They're very dark, unattractive, humble in appearance, not very nice to look at, a bit shabbily dressed, and he says to them: You go, you follow that poor man, and you hire him in your own name to work for me; and you offer him double wages to work in my house, in my mansion. So what is the work that the poor man is to be hired to do? He's to help the other two men in clearing away a huge heap of dirt that has accumulated at the back of the mansion. So the two shabbily dressed men go to the poor man, they make the proposal, it is accepted, and the three of them work together every day shovelling that heap of dirt and removing it in baskets on their back to a distant place. And the poor man takes up his abode in a hovel of straw not very far away from the mansion. So the rich man, looking through the window of his room can see in the distance the hovel of straw where the poor man is living, and it seems very strange to him that he, the father, should be staying in this beautiful mansion, and the son staying so near in this hovel of straw, not knowing that he's so close to his own father.

So one day, after quite a long while, the rich man, the father, puts on old dirty clothes, and he takes a basket in his hands, and in this way he manages to approach the poor man, his son, and actually to have a little chat with him. And he tells him what sort of work he should do. He tells him not to work anywhere else, promises to give him extra money, and says if he needs any sort of odd thing or a pot or a jug or anything like that, or a bit of extra grain, well, he should just ask for it and he says: In any case I've got an old cloak in the cupboard, I'll give you that if you like, and he says: Don't worry, you've been working well, I'm quite pleased with you, you seem sincere, you seem honest, devoted, not like some of these other men I've got, so you just think that - well, after all, I'm an old man - you just think I'm like your own father, just look to me as your father, and I'll treat you just like my own son.

So in this way, the parable goes on, things proceed for quite a number of years. The poor man, the son, continued clearing away the dirt from the back of the mansion every day, and he got into the habit of going in and out of the mansion, the rich man's house, every day, without any hesitation at all. But he continued to live in his old hovel of straw.

Now again after a while the rich man felt sick, and he started feeling that he was soon going to die, so he called the poor man, his son, and he said: Look, you're very trustworthy now. I regard you as my own son. I'm going to hand over to you the management of all my affairs; you'll be my manager, my steward. You do everything on my behalf. So from that day the poor man was the manager, was the

steward, and he became familiar with all the rich man's affairs, all his money, his investments, his trade, his transactions, everything. And he used to go, as before, freely in and out of the mansion, but he continued to live in his own old hovel, and he continued to think that he was poor, because even though he was handling all this wealth, it wasn't his, it was his master's, as he thought. He himself remained poor.

So all the time the rich man was watching him, watching his reactions, watching his attitudes, and he saw that bit by bit over the years the poor man was becoming accustomed to riches, he was used to handling riches, and he saw that he was becoming a bit ashamed that in the past he'd lived so miserably and been so poor. And the rich man saw that the poor man had started wanting to be rich himself, had started wanting to be like the rich man. Now by the time this stage of the story had been reached the rich man was at the point of death. He was very very old and very weak indeed, and he felt he was now going to pass away. So he thought: The time is ripe. He sent for the poor man, he sent for all the people in the city, sent for the king's representative, sent for the merchants, his friends, his distant relations, ordinary citizens, country folk from round about, and he presented the poor man, his steward, to them, and he said: He's not really my steward, he is my own son. And he told them the whole story of what had happened, and on the spot he handed over his wealth to the son. And the son of course was amazed and rejoiced in his good fortune that so unexpectedly, in such a remarkable way, he had become rich.

So this is the parable, the Parable of the Return Journey. And the four elders, headed by Mahakasyapa, they apply this story to their own case. They say, they confess if you like, that so far they have been contented with inferior things, they've been contented with an inferior spiritual ideal. But they say now the Buddha, in his kindness, in his generosity, has made them heir to all his spiritual treasures, has revealed to them a higher spiritual ideal, has revealed to them the Bodhisattva Ideal, the ideal of attaining Supreme Enlightenment, Perfect Buddhahood, for the sake and the benefit not of themselves alone but all sentient beings. So they feel overjoyed, they feel as if they'd attained unexpectedly a priceless jewel.

Now this is the general meaning of the parable within the context of the sutra, and it takes us quite far. But we may say that the parable is capable of a much wider application, in some ways even a deeper application. So we'll go through it point by point, as we did last week with the Parable of the Burning House, and we'll comment briefly on some of the more important issues, the more important themes involved. But before we do that, I'd like to draw your attention to something that may be of interest. You've all now heard the parable, you've all listened to the parable, and as you were listening to it you might have felt from time to time that it all had a rather familiar ring, as though you'd heard the parable before, as though you'd encountered this story somewhere else. But thinking back you know, or at least you're pretty sure, that you haven't read the White Lotus Sutra. After all, it's not the sort of thing you read one weekend and then forget all about it. But you seem to have heard the parable, you seem to have listened to this story before. So what is the explanation? Well, the explanation is, as some of you might have concluded by this time, the explanation is that the Myth or the Parable of the Return Journey resembles a more familiar parable, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. And the Parable of the Prodigal Son is of course one of the parables of Christ, and it occurs in the Gospel according to Saint Luke, Chapter 15. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is told by Christ to elucidate a somewhat different point, and it also has a rather different sequel, but so far as general outline is concerned we may say, it's the same story. In both of the parables there's an affectionate father, there's a son who runs away, and in both parables the runaway son lives miserably for a while before returning to the bosom of his father, and in both parables the position of servant, of employee, is contrasted with the position of son.

But those are the resemblances; there are also quite important differences between the two parables, though not perhaps as stories. In the Gospel parable the prodigal son appears to be guilty of wilful disobedience, whereas in the White Lotus's parable the son seems to go astray, to wander, just through carelessness and forgetfulness. And this fact seems to illustrate an important difference between Buddhism and Christianity, Christianity emphasizing as it were sin and disobedience and guilt, and Buddhism emphasizing forgetfulness and unmindfulness and ignorance. But we've no time to go into this now.

I'd like, just for a minute, to refer to another parable, and this parable constitutes an even more interesting parallel with the Parable of the Return Journey than does the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

It also belongs roughly to the same period. And this parable occurs in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostle Thomas. Now this is essentially a Gnostic work. It's extant in Syriac and also in Greek, and the original is in Syriac. And here too there's a father and a son. And the son lives in what the text calls the kingdom of his father's house. And we're told that he delights in the wealth and the splendour of his surroundings. But one day he's sent forth on a mission. He's sent from the East, where the kingdom of his father's house is, sent down into the land of Egypt. And he's sent there on a mission, he's sent to bring back the one pearl. And the pearl lies in the midst of the sea, and it's encircled by a great serpent, a great dragon. So the parable proceeds. It tells us how the son reaches the land of Egypt, how he finds the dragon, and how he waits for the dragon to go to sleep so that he can take from him the pearl. But there are the Egyptians to be reckoned with. The Egyptians become suspicious of this stranger, even though he's wearing their garments, and they give him one day a drugged drink. And when he has drunk this drugged drink the son forgets himself. He forgets that he is the son of a king, he forgets all about the past, he knows only the present, and he enters the service of the king of Egypt. And of course he forgets all about the pearl, and eventually, living with the Egyptians, eating their food, drinking their drink, he becomes more and more like them, and in the end he falls, we're told, into a deep sleep, a deep slumber. And his father in the East, who knows what is happening, becomes very worried. And he sends his son, his sleeping son, a letter, reminding him of his mission, and on receiving this letter, which arrives in the form of a bird, the son at once comes to his senses, and having come to his senses he enchants the dragon, he seizes the pearl, and he returns home to his father's kingdom in the East in triumph. And he's received by his father with great joy. So this is the outline of the story, this is the outline of this parable.

Now modern translators call this parable the Hymn of the Pearl, but it isn't called this in the text. In the text it is called the Song of the Apostle Judas Thomas in the land of the Indians. And it's said to have been composed when he was imprisoned there. And we may say that this association with India is interesting. In any case, Saint Thomas, one of the Twelve Apostles, is traditionally known as the Apostle to India, he is supposed to have visited India not long after the death of Christ. And we may say that he could well have had contact with Buddhism there, as it was flourishing all over India at that time. But we've no time now to pursue this interesting speculation; we have to get back to the Myth of the Return Journey, back to the beginning of our parable.

So it starts off, as we've seen, by saying that a certain man left his father and went away, left his father and went away. So the story begins with separation. If you like, the story begins with alienation. It begins with a separation between a father and a son, and this is the incident, this is the event from which everything else in the story follows, this separation. We may say that this separation is in a way even the theme of the story. So what is meant by this separation, this separation of father and son? Who, we may ask, or what are the father and the son?

Now very briefly speaking the father represents what we may call provisionally, not taking the expression too literally, the higher self, and the son is the lower self, and the two are separated. The lower self is separated from the higher self. In other words, putting it into more contemporary language, the human condition is one of alienation. Man is alienated from his own higher self, from his own better nature if you like. He's alienated from his own highest potentialities, alienated from truth, alienated from reality. This is what the separation, the son's going away from the father, means. And the son went to a distant country. He didn't go just a short distance away; he went far away, he went into an altogether different part of the world, into a different kingdom, a different country. In other words, the alienation between the father and the son, the higher self and the lower self is very severe. We might even go so far as to say that the split, the schism between the two is complete, there's now no contact between them of any kind.

Also, having gone to the distant country the son lives there many years, even as much, according to the text, as fifty years. This means that the alienation is not a thing of yesterday or the day before; the alienation is of long standing. It's been going on for a long time, and this of course raises a very interesting point. It raises the whole question of time. We say that the human condition, if you like the condition of the human race, is one of alienation, alienation from truth, from reality. But we may ask, we may very pertinently enquire, when did this state, when did this condition begin? The parable, if we take it literally, suggests that it all happened in the past at a certain definite time, a certain point in time, and this is, of course, or was of course, the view of orthodox Christianity. Orthodox Christianity

taught, and still perhaps officially teaches, that it all happened a very long time ago but at a certain point in time, if you like at the beginning of time. It happened in the garden of Eden. It happened when Adam and Eve ate the apple; in other words, it happened at the time of the fall of man. Before that man was living in harmony with God, in obedience to the commands of God, but at that time, the time of the fall, man became disobedient, he disobeyed God, he fell, and he became alienated from God. So the human condition of alienation according to orthodox Christianity goes back to that point. Before that, man was not alienated.

Now, traditional Buddhism holds a different view. According to the Buddha himself you can go back and back and back in time. You can go back for millions of years, millions of ages, and millions of ages of years, but he says you will never come to an absolute first point, you will never come to an absolute first beginning of things. He says the beginning of things is incalculable, is imperceptible. However far back you go you can still go further back, you never come to that first point, that absolute beginning. You'll never get back to a point before the point at which time begins. So the beginning of the story, the beginning of the parable, is not in time at all. It's, we may say, out of time, and therefore the return journey which is the subject matter of the parable is not a journey back into the past. It's not a journey back into the past, it's a journey out of time altogether, it transcends time altogether, and it's very important that we should understand this.

Some people read books about Zen, or books purporting to be about Zen, and in them they come across all sorts of strange and wonderful and apparently meaningful expressions, all sorts of snappy little koans and mondos which really appeal to lots and lots of people. And one of these very typical Zen sayings, which is of course absolutely true, or expressions, speaks of your original face before you were born. And the Zen masters apparently are rather fond of asking their disciples at a minute's notice to show them their original face before they were born. They say: Come on, show it, I want to see it. Of course usually the poor disciple fails miserably as poor disciples usually do in these stories, stories having been written by the masters apparently, but the expression comes up again and again. So the disciple is often advised to get back to his original face before he was born. So the disciple sits there thinking about yesterday, the day before, the week before, month ago, year ago, two years ago, ten years ago, twenty years ago, thirty years ago, oh yes, thirty four years ago I was born, and before that, if I can get back to the point before that then I'll encounter my original face.

But this is all wrong. It's all wrong because it's all been understood literally. The disciple is thinking that he's got to get back into the past, to go back to the time before he was born, to his original face as it was before he was born, as if to say: Here's the original face so many years ago, and after that you were born and you don't see your original face any more, so before a certain point in time there was the original face and after that there was no original face apparently, not for the time being anyway. But this is a complete misunderstanding. Though the expression seems to mean that, if we go trying to track down the original face in the past, if we take this expression 'original' or the word 'before' literally, then we're not really practising Zen, oh no, we're just regressing in the psychological, even in the psychoanalytical sense; we're just going back into the past, and the past is no nearer to Enlightenment than the present or the future, because time has got nothing to do with Enlightenment. And one can even say that one is born in the Zen sense out of time; and one's original face exists out of time too. So the Zen expression 'seeing your original face', seeing the original face which you had before you were born, going back to that, 'back' in single inverted commas, has got nothing to do with going back in time. It's got nothing to do even with going forward in time. It's got nothing to do with standing still at the present moment of time. When Zen speaks of seeing your original face before you were born, it means going outside time altogether, just rocketing through time and coming up on the other side in a dimension where there's no time at all, no past, no present, no future - and that's where the original face is to be seen and nowhere else. That's where it 'is' - again single inverted commas - all the time.

So there's no question of going back and enquiring into the beginnings within time of one's state of alienation. You're alienated here and now. You're alienated from reality here and now, and all you have to do is here and now transcend, overcome, the alienation from reality; and you won't do that by just going back and back into the past, because you're still running on the rails of the alienation itself. You have to make a sort of leap, a crosswise leap, just a jump from the top of the pole, and land, if you're lucky, in the absolute - no going back into the past.

And this is the point also of the Buddha's famous parable in the Pali canon of the poisoned arrow - while we're on the subject of parables we might as well have a surfeit of them while we're at it - the Parable of the Poisoned Arrow, again a parable connected with battle, with war. The Buddha said that there was a battle and one of the soldiers was wounded, and he was wounded by one of those very ungentlemanly things, a poisoned arrow. And the surgeon came along and he said: Well, let me take it out at once - it's poisoned. So the wounded soldier said: Wait a minute, not so quick. He said: Before I let you take out that arrow, I want to know the answer to a few questions. Who shot that arrow? I want to know. After all, it's sticking in me; why shouldn't I know? And what sort of arrow is it, anyway? Is it a wooden one; is it an iron one? And if it's wood, what sort of wood is it made from? Is it oak, is it cedar? What is it? And what about the feather? Where does the feather come from? Is it a goose feather, or a peacock feather? And who shot it? Was he a brahmin, or kshatriya, or vaisya? Was he tall, was he dark, was he fair? Was he young, was he old? What sort of bow was he using? I want to know this. Then you can take out the arrow.

So the Buddha said: Well, before he could learn all those things he'd be dead from the poison in the arrow. The main thing is to take out the arrow, not to enquire where it comes from. So the Buddha says: If you want to go back and back and back all the time - Where did the world come from? How did we get into such a mess? What was I in my last birth? What are the roots of my neurosis - if you want to go back and back and back all the time, he said, there's no end to it. Just see your present alienated, neurotic, conditioned, unwholesome, negative state, and just rise above it. Go right soaring up into eternity, into a spiritual dimension, don't go back step after step into the past, there's no end to it - you can go back indefinitely, there's no end to it. You'll still be walking, as it were, in millions of years, you'll never get to the end. So this is the Parable of the Poisoned Arrow.

Anyway, let's get back to the Parable of the Return Journey. The son in this parable roams about seeking livelihood for the sake of food and clothing. The son, we know, represents the lower self, the alienated self. So he's roaming around, wandering from place to place, and he's looking, he's in search of the necessities of life. Now let's translate this into modern terms. All he wants is food and clothing; he's got no higher ideals than that. He doesn't think about wealth or riches or trade or business or commerce like his good father. All he wants is food and clothing. So we may borrow terms from Abraham Maslow, from his book *'Towards a Psychology of Being'*, and we can say that the lower self is need-motivated, is not growth-motivated. If you want to know in greater detail what this means I suggest you turn to this book, *'Towards a Psychology of Being'* by Abraham Maslow; it's a very interesting and well-written book indeed.

But the father is different. Whereas the son, the alienated self, is need-motivated, he does everything out of a need, a subjective need, a craving, the father is, as it were, growth-motivated; he's growing all the time, developing all the time. The parable expresses all this in terms of riches, but you're not to think that the parable is talking about money-grabbing or that it's glorifying capitalism or anything like that. It's a parable, it has a meaning, it's symbolical if you like. So the father is growing, he's the higher self, and he's accumulating as it were, he's possessed of, all possible, all conceivable spiritual riches and spiritual qualities. He isn't indigent spiritually, he's rich, he's well endowed. We'll go into all this a little bit later on.

And all the time, the text says, he's thinking of the son. This has a meaning. There are two selves, the higher self and the lower self. The higher self never loses its awareness; it's conscious, it's aware all the time. We may forget it, we may become oblivious to it, we may forget it, but it never forgets us. But at the same time, and this is the mystery, we are it.

It's as though there are two chambers - I've used this analogy before - it's as though there are two chambers. It's as though underground there's an enormous subterranean chamber which is all lit up from within, but there are no windows from the outside in, so you can't see that subterranean chamber, you can't see that light inside, and you are, as it were, living in a little tiny chamber next to that big one. And you are living inside that - this of course is the lower self - and you are not aware of that other much larger chamber of which this little chamber is really a part. There's a sort of wall, a partition between the two. But it's as though there's a pane, in between, of glass, which is transparent from one side but not transparent from the other. It's as though one can look from that larger illuminated chamber through that panel, through that window, into this little chamber, but you cannot look from the little chamber

into the big chamber. So it's as though the big chamber knows what is going on in the little chamber, but the little chamber doesn't know what is going on in the big chamber. Or in other words, as I've said, the higher self doesn't forget the lower self, even although the lower self forgets the higher self. But even though the lower self forgets the higher self, the higher self is all the time the higher self of the lower self.

Now continuing, the parable says that the son has been roaming from one town and one country to another and eventually reaches the place where his father is living. In other words, the son is already on his way back, but he doesn't know this. He's being driven from place to place by his needs, his craving - his need for food, his need for clothing; and it's this that brings him almost to his father's door. So what does this mean?

Let's say that we have a certain problem, maybe a psychological problem, and we're very worried about this problem, so worried that we can't sleep, suffer from insomnia, and sleeping tablets don't help. And we don't have any peace of mind, and we don't know what to do. And one day some friend says to us: I know what'll help you. You ought to meditate. So you ask: How? Where? And they tell you: All right, you go along to such-and-such place, there's a class; you join that, it might help you, it might help you get peace of mind, get rid of that problem. So all right, you join the class. You practise the meditation. All you want to do is to get a bit of peace of mind, have a bit of sleep, and forget about that problem, that's all you want.

But in the course of your contact, in the course of your practice of meditation, in the course of going to that class, you start hearing about something that you hadn't heard about before, and in which you weren't in any case especially interested, namely Buddhism. And after a while, after some months maybe, believe it or not, you find yourself not just practising meditation, not just trying to get rid of your problem, not just trying to get peace of mind, not just trying to have a good night's sleep, but you're actually trying to follow the spiritual path. And in course of time you even start thinking in terms of Enlightenment, of spiritual development, of the Higher Evolution. So when did you take the first step in that direction? You took the first step in that direction when you decided to join the class; but at that time you did not know it, you were merely driven by your needs, just like the son in the parable approaching his father's city, his father's door, without knowing it.

So the son happens to see his father sitting at the door of the house, in the gate. And you may remember that the parable gives a very long and lavish description of his magnificence as he sits there. It speaks of gold, of jewels, of flowers, and all this is of great significance, all this very sort of poetical way of speaking about the father, because the father is the higher self. He's a glorious figure, an archetypal figure; he's a sort of god, a sort of deity, a Buddha, so therefore he's described in this way, lots of light, lots of colour, lots of jewels, lots of brilliance, and so on.

But how does the poor man react? The poor man, the parable says, is terrified at the sight. He thinks that he's come upon a king or a nobleman, and he wants to run away, and he doesn't recognize his own father. So what does this mean? It means that the alienation between the two, the lower self and the higher self, is quite severe. Even when the two, the lower self and the higher self, come together, even confront each other, the former, the lower self, does not recognize the higher self as its own, as its own higher self; thinks it is something other, something strange, something foreign.

So when does this sort of confrontation between the lower self and the higher self occur? It occurs when we come face to face, in one way or another, with the spiritual ideal, or with an embodiment of the spiritual ideal, whether by way of a literary description, or a painting, say a painting of the Buddha, or an image, say an image of the Buddha, or some god or saint. And we think, the lower self thinks, this has got nothing to do with me. This is out there. This is something separate, something distinct. I'm down here; I'm poor, humble. I'm not like that. I don't have those qualities. And this is especially true in the theistic systems, those systems which believe in a personal creator god; in fact it's true in all dualistic systems.

This, we may say, is the stage of religious projection. All those qualities buried as it were deep down in the depths of our own nature, in the unconscious, these, not realizing that they are are own, we project outwards, and we see them outwardly in the form of these glorious external figures. We think

that we are poor, they are rich; we have none such qualities, they are endowed with all those qualities. Now this isn't negative, this sort of projection, this religious projection is a positive thing, because it enables us to see those qualities in a very concrete way, so it's a step in the right direction. But the projection must be surpassed, must be resolved; we must claim those qualities as our own, not our own in an egoistic sense, they don't belong to the ego, but they belong to us in the deepest and truest depths of our being.

So the son doesn't recognize the father, but the father recognizes the son at first sight, and he sends messengers to bring the poor man back. But the poor man is terrified, thinks he's going to be arrested, led off to execution, and he faints away. Now this reminds me of an episode, a very famous episode, from one of the best known Buddhist scriptures in the West, best known at least by name, that is the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. And what does the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* say? The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is describing what happens just before death, at the time of death, after death; and among other things it says that at the time of death itself the dying person sees what it calls a clear light, a brilliant light, a white light of absolutely unbearable brilliance, like ten thousand, a hundred thousand, a million suns suddenly bursting on one's vision. And the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* says this light is the light of Reality, it's the light of Truth, it's the light of the Void, *sunyata*. And it further says that if we can recognize this light as not coming from outside us, but coming from within, from deep within, if we can recognize this as the light of our own true mind, our own intrinsic mind, our own true self, if we can recognize this, that the light is not bursting upon us from without but is as it were unfolding from within, that we are that light, that light is us; if we can realize that, it says, if we can realize our unity with that light, our oneness with that light, then we gain liberation, Enlightenment, Buddhahood, on the spot. We have gained all that could possibly be gained at that time in that way.

But what happens? The light comes, it flashes, and most people, most dying people, are just terribly afraid. They shrink back in fear. They don't want to face the light, the light is too much, it's overpowering, it's blinding, it's terrible. So they shrink back and they withdraw, they retreat to a lower safer level of existence. They fail to recognize the light as their own, and they swoon away, they become unconscious, and eventually they are reborn. Humankind cannot bear very much reality. And this is true not only of the moment of death, but it's true of all those moments in which we encounter a truth that seems more than we are able to bear.

Now you note that the poor man is not just terrified. He's got all sorts of thoughts, ideas, fears. He thinks he's being arrested. He thinks that he'll be executed. So that's just like us. When we come in contact with the truth sometimes, or very often, we don't think it's liberating, we think that it's a nuisance, it's a limitation. Some people, for instance, say: When I become Enlightened, well, there'll be a difficulty. I won't be able to do so and so, and I would like to do it. This is their attitude, this is their approach. So we don't want to change. We don't want to change our ideas, we don't want to change ourselves, so the truth, the truth itself, reality itself, which is liberating, to us in that sort of diseased state seems confining, narrow.

And not only that, we are afraid of dying, just like that poor man in the parable. When he sees the rich man's messenger he thinks he's going to be led off to execution. So in the same way, when we come in contact with the truth, or when the self, the lower self, if you like the I, the ego, comes in contact with the truth, with reality, it becomes very afraid, it thinks, as it were: I'm going to be led off to execution. I'm finished, this is the end of me. So of course it shrinks back.

But the rich man lets his son go away, but of course he hasn't given up hope, and he has recourse to a trick. He sends two poor-looking men, miserable-looking men, and through them he engages the poor man, his son, at double wages to work for him. And what is the work that is given? - clearing away dirt. The son clears away dirt. Now what does this mean? Now according to the four elders in their own interpretation of the parable, this represents, the son's clearing away dirt represents, the rather narrow selfish type of religious life, the religious life which is aimed only at individual development, so-called, to the exclusion of any concern with others. And the four elders led by Mahakasyapa in the sutra, they identify this sort of religious life, this sort of approach, with the old Hinayana.

Now this is perhaps rather strong, to speak of the Hinayana in this way, and I think we can give this episode, or this incident, or this little detail, a better interpretation, at least one that is more

contemporary. And I suggest that the clearing away of the dirt in which the poor man, the son, is engaged represents the whole process, the whole business of psychoanalysis. After all, the alienated person undergoes analysis. And what does the dirt represent, the heap of dirt? Surely that's all his repressions. He's engaged in removing them, resolving them, and of course it all takes rather a long time. The text itself mentions a period of twenty years, and we all know, or at least maybe some of us know, that analysis does sometimes take as long as that. So maybe we can interpret this little episode of clearing away the dirt in this sort of way. The dirt is all our negative emotions, all our repressions, our complexes and so on.

And eventually the father manages to speak to the son and confidence springs up between them, and the poor man continues to clear away the dirt, and the text says that he goes in and out of the mansion, the rich man's mansion without hesitation, but continues to live in his own hovel. So what does this mean? This refers to the scholar. This refers to the specialist, the academic specialist in comparative religion. He's very widely read, he's very learned. He knows the texts; sometimes he knows them in the original languages - Pali, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Chinese. He knows the doctrines, the teachings. He knows even the higher teachings, even claims sometimes to have studied the esoteric teachings; in other words, he goes in and out of the mansion without hesitation. He knows exactly what's there, he'll tell you all about it, but he doesn't live in the mansion. Where does he live? He lives in the hovel made of straw. And what's that? The hovel made of straw represents all his real interests, the things he's really interested in as an academic. He's interested in promotion within his own department. He's interested, like anybody else, in his annual increase. He's interested in prestige within his own profession, and he's very interested only too often in controversy and brisk exchange of articles with other scholars who think differently from himself.

So this is the sort of thing that the parable has in mind here. Or we may say on a higher level it refers, this going in and out of the mansion without hesitation refers, to the average inbetween follower of religion. Such a person is undoubtedly sincere and maybe from time to time he's had genuine religious experience. He goes in and out of the mansion, as it were, but he lives at home. Even though he has some religious, some spiritual experience - maybe during the weekly meditation class - he's more occupied, in fact he's preoccupied most of the time, with comparatively mundane things. I remember that in one of his books William James, the great psychologist and author of '*Varieties of Religious Experience*', is discussing: What is a religious person? And he says: A religious person is not one who has religious experiences. He says anybody can have religious experiences. He says a religious person is one who makes religious experiences the centre of his existence. We may say it's not important where we visit. What is important is where we permanently live, or at least where we live most of the time; in other words, where our real centre of interest lies. And, as the Gospel says, where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Now the rich man falls sick, he's about to die, and he hands the management of his affairs over to the poor man. The poor man becomes familiar with riches but continues to live in the hovel. Now what does this represent? We may say that this represents the theist, or the theistically inclined mystic; this represents the dualistic approach in general. Here someone has many spiritual experiences, even great, overwhelming, uplifting spiritual experiences, but they all come, or seem to come, from the outside. He says: They come from God, they don't come from me. God also of course is outside. These experiences, they aren't mine, they come to me from the outside; they're gifts, given to me. They're nothing to do with me. I have nothing. God gives everything.

Now once one reaches this stage only time is required. So the rich man watches the poor man. Then he sees that he's becoming used to riches, ashamed of his former poverty, and that he'd like to be like the rich man - in other words, the alienation of lower self from higher self is becoming less and less. And now the rich man is at the point of death. In other words, the alienation is practically over. There's just a thin thread remaining. The lower self and the higher self are almost one. So the rich man acknowledges the poor man as his son and he dies. There aren't two any more, there's not father and son any more, rich man and poor man; there's only one, one rich man who was a poor man. In other words, unity, unity between the lower self and the higher self, has been completely restored. The return journey has been accomplished.

So our journey also is nearly accomplished. Let's turn back to the immediate context of the parable and

then conclude. The parable has been told, as we know, by the four elders headed by Mahakasyapa, and they compare themselves to the son in the parable - and the Buddha, of course, is the father. Formerly, they say, in effect, they hadn't thought of following his example. They hadn't thought of becoming like the Buddha, they hadn't dared to think in those terms. They'd only thought in terms of following his teaching, his verbal teaching, and that teaching had seemed to indicate a lower, a lesser goal, the goal of individual emancipation, the goal of destruction simply of one's negative emotions. But they now realize, they say, that that is not enough. It's not enough just to destroy one's negative emotions. There are all sorts of positive qualities to be developed. It's not enough to have Wisdom; one must have Compassion too. It's not enough to be an Arahant, one must become like the Buddha himself. One must follow the Bodhisattva Path; one must aspire to Supreme Enlightenment, Perfect Buddhahood.

In other words, the four elders headed by Mahakasyapa wake up to the truth of what we've called the Higher Evolution of Man. They realize that the Buddha isn't just something unique, unrepeatable. They realize that the Buddha is a sort of forerunner, that the Buddha is an example of what others too can be, what others too can become, what they can grow into, develop into, if only they make the effort. So they realize in effect that religion, to use the familiar but perhaps not very happy term, they realize that religion is not just a personal affair in a negative limited sense. They realize that religion, that the religious life, is part of, if you like, a cosmic adventure, and this is what we too have to try to realize.

We have to try to realize that what, again for want of a better word we call religion, when properly understood, is not something remote from life, it's not just a dull little churchy backwater. Religion properly understood is life become as it were conscious of its own upward tendency, its own tendency to grow and to develop. So whether we know it or don't know it, we are all involved, directly or indirectly, in this movement, this tendency, this upward movement, upward tendency of life. And this means that each one of us is the poor man in the parable, each one of us is the son who's gone away. But each one of us also, if we did but know it, is the rich man, is the father. And each one of us is making, even at this very moment, the return journey.