

Lecture 107: The Symbolism of the Cremation Ground and the Celestial Maidens

Some of you know, I think, that I spent in the course of the last few decades quite a number of years in the East, - in several different parts of the East, but especially in India and more especially in north-eastern India, in Kalimpong which is situated at the Eastern end of the Himalayas, within sight of Tibet, within sight not only of Tibet, but of Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, besides the plains of Bengal. And in the course of those years, as I moved about, as I lived in Kalimpong, as I lived in the Himalayas, as I visited also many other different parts of the country, as I met different people, as I found myself in different situations, I had, as was natural, a number of experiences of different kinds. Some of these experiences were pleasant, some of those experiences were unpleasant, though even the unpleasant ones seemed in retrospect to have their own value. And some experiences again were not only pleasant, but very pleasant indeed, so much so that the recollection of them, even the impression of them remains with me after quite a number of years. But I remember that one of my pleasant experiences, I could almost say, one of my most enjoyable experiences, was in connection with funerals.

Now, in this country we don't usually regard funerals as being particularly pleasant or festive occasions, certainly nothing to look forward to, not your own funeral, anyway. Funerals may be pleasant, even enjoyable, festive occasions in the more outlying parts of these islands, such as Scotland, but certainly not in England, at least. Here, we don't usually regard funerals as pleasant social occasions. But in the East, in the East in general, in India, and especially in the Buddhist East, in Buddhist India, Buddhist Himalaya, this is certainly not the case. There, people do not find funerals, as it were, unpleasant. Of course, when there is a funeral, when you hear that somebody has died, maybe someone known to you, maybe some member of your family, of course, you feel sad, especially if the departed person was at all closely connected with you. But that's, as it were, a thing apart. The funeral itself, the funeral procession, the occasion of the funeral, is almost, one may say, enjoyable, - it isn't sad. Certainly one can say that it isn't in any sense mournful or depressing. In any case, by the time the funeral takes place, which is usually two or three days after the death, or sometimes even a week, mourners, even those who really have lost someone near and dear to them, the mourners have got over the worst of their grief. They've dried their tears. They've recovered from the initial shock. They've begun to get used to the new state of affairs, they've begun to accept the fact that such and such a person is dead. And by the time, therefore, that the funeral arrives, the general mood is not sad, not grief-stricken, the general mood, one can say, is of a kind of solemnity, but it's a solemnity tinged with a strange kind of exhilaration, a strange kind even of joy. And this is especially the case once the funeral procession has left the home. The deceased person, usually, as it were, lies in state, at his own home. For a couple of days all his friends, relations, well-wishers, acquaintances, business connections etc all come to have a look, just to see him for the last time, - there he is lying on the bier, - and this sometimes takes, in the case of well-known persons two or three days, but at last all that is over, everybody has come, everybody has paid their last respects with a garland of flowers or a ceremonial white scarf, and now the funeral procession is ready to leave the house. So, four stout men, or maybe eight stout men, they raise the body onto their shoulders, usually on a bier and they carry it forth, from the house, usually feet foremost. And, at such a time, the face is usually kept uncovered. We'd consider this rather indecent in this country, if a dead body was conveyed through the streets with the face uncovered. But, in the East, in India, this is accepted as something perfectly right and natural. And the bier, the dead body is accompanied from the house only by the menfolk. The women are all left at home. The bier with the corpse on it is born through the streets of the town or the village where the person died. And as the funeral procession moves along through the streets, the sort of word spreads, there is a little bit of commotion and people all come from the shops and houses to have a look, to see who it is who is being carried, I won't say to his last resting place, but to the funeral pyre.

So, in this way we see the bier with the corpse on it borne through the streets, through the crowds, - it reaches the outskirts of the town or the village and it's borne in the direction of the cremation ground. And, usually, in India, the cremation ground is situated on the outskirts of the village, or even at some distance from the village. And very often it's situated at a rather beautiful spot on the bank of the river. And the cremation ground is, of course, a quiet place. It's, in any case, remote, people don't usually go there. It's a solitary place, even a lonely place. And if you go there, even during the day, even when the sun is shining, especially if you go on your own, you'll find in the cremation ground, as I've found, a rather strange atmosphere. There's a sort of quivering, there's a sort of vibration in the atmosphere which you can almost see. It's in a way,

sort of, alive, in a way that other places do not seem to be alive. And as one looks around, as one looks around at the cremation ground, one sees, here and there, all around, little heaps of charred wood, the charred wood left over from the funeral pyre on which the dead bodies have been burned. And if you look more closely, if you look down at the ground, if you look round about these heaps of charred wood, you may even find a human skull, or portion of a skull, or a thigh-bone, or a finger bone, or just a piece of bone. And if you happen to visit rather late in the day, towards evening time, when it's dusk, when the shades of night are falling, then you see slinking around the shadowy figure of a jackal, who may look at you with glowing green eyes and then just disappear with a short bark.

And it's here, it's in the cremation that the body is brought and committed to the flames. First of all the pyre has to be built, - people usually do this themselves. They bring or they buy on the spot from some vendor, great logs of wood, they dig a trench, they put great stones on either side, then they lay the logs of wood across, then they put more logs on in the opposite direction, there may be more logs still, leaving plenty of room in between, then they put the corpse, after removing most of the clothing, and then, on top, they put some lighter pieces of wood. And finally they usually sprinkle the whole pyre with ghee, that is to say, clarified butter, if they can afford it, or with oil, or at least, nowadays this is what happens, with tins of kerosene. And perhaps also if there is a priest present, a Brahmin or lama or some other such officiant, mantras are chanted, prayers of some kind are said, and when this has been done, the next of kin, usually the son, or the brother, takes a torch and lights the funeral pyre. And within minutes, especially if there's a good wind, it's burning and blazing merrily, sending up showers of sparks into the heavens. And when it's really blazing, and when you can see the body beginning to be consumed, when the body is just a sort of molten mass, bright and glowing, when the cremation is well under way, then you find, everybody starts relaxing. They start talking, they start talking, of course, about the deceased, - about who else? - about his loveable characteristics, his little faults, then they start swapping stories about him, - he said this on such and such an occasion, or did that, a scrape he'd got into, or some little adventure that someone had had with him, - they start talking about him in this way, and eventually they seem to generate a very friendly, very cheerful atmosphere with plenty of goodwill towards the dear departed. So cheerful do they get eventually that the cups of tea start circulating, an (?) vendor appears, as if by magic, complete with teapot and little cups, and they are drinking cups of tea and maybe eating biscuits as well, and sometimes, on some occasions, in some circles they circulate something rather stronger than tea. And before you know what has happened, everybody is having, as it were, a thoroughly good time, everybody is thoroughly enjoying themselves, - and without the slightest feeling of anything being out of place, without the slightest feeling of guilt and impropriety to them it seems just natural. After all, to die and to be cremated, is just as natural, just as inevitable as to be born, as to live. So life and death, people think, people feel, on occasions like this, life and death are both to be accepted, both ultimately to be reconciled. Life and death are the two sides of one and the same coin. People may not be very philosophical, may not be very metaphysically inclined, but this is what they feel, inarticulately at least, at the time of the cremation when they are enjoying themselves afterwards, - it's all part of life. You've got to accept it all ultimately, cheerfully, or at least, tranquilly, there's no time, no place for grief, or at least, not much time and not many places. So, this is how it goes on, one hour, two hours and then eventually the fire starts dying down, the cremation is nearly over, the corpse is practically consumed. So once people have satisfied themselves that the corpse is going to be completely consumed, they just leave it burning there, they leave it smouldering, and they go home. And even for those who have been grieving, even for those who have just witnessed the cremation of someone near and dear to them, it has been, on the whole, a not unpleasant experience, even a rewarding experience, even an uplifting experience.

Now, I'm reminded of all this, because tonight we are concerned with the symbolism of the cremation ground, concerned, in fact, with the symbolism of cremation ground AND the celestial maidens. And by the celestial maidens we mean, of course, the Dakinis, about whom we heard something last week. Now, you may be wondering perhaps, at this point, you may even have wondered it when you perused our poster, or when you heard the chairman's introductory remarks, you have been wondering, what on earth celestial maidens were doing in a cremation ground? It doesn't quite seem a fitting place for young ladies, even celestial ones. So, in order to understand this, what the Dakinis, the celestial maidens, are doing in the cremation ground, we

have to go back. We have to go back to the sources of the Tantric tradition, back to the sources of the Nyingmapa tradition in particular, and back to the legendary life, if you like, the symbolic biography of Padmasambhava, the great Tantric guru of India and Tibet.

Some months ago, in the course of a lecture given in connection with Padmasambhava's anniversary, we saw that this great teacher, this great sage, this great yogi, lived in the eighth century in India. We saw that he had a very checkered career, to say the least. He began life as the adopted son of a king, was brought up as a prince, was married, but left his wife, became a monk, studied all forms of Buddhism, became a great scholar, teacher, practised also meditation very extensively, especially Tantric meditation of various kinds, travelled widely, even outside India, and eventually, at the culmination, we may say, of the checkered career, he became enlightened, became known throughout India and Tibet and beyond as the greatest teacher, the greatest master of the Tantra of his day. Now, at one stage of his career, before he became enlightened, while he was still treading the Tantric path, in quest of enlightenment, Padmasambhava seems to have spent a great deal of his time in cremation grounds, cremation grounds in different parts of India. And he is supposed to have lived there with the celestial maidens, with the Dakinis. And according to reports that were circulating in India at that time, he spent his time in the cremation grounds with the Dakinis, with the celestial maidens, singing, dancing, drinking wine etc. Now, whether this episode, even this series of episodes of Padmasambhava's frequenting the cremation ground associating with the Dakinis in this way is to be taken historically, as historic fact, or as legend, as symbol, as part of the symbolical biography is very difficult to tell. We don't really know. In the biography of Padmasambhava, the life of Padmasambhava that has come down to us, fact, historical fact and symbolical statement shade, it seems, one into the other. Sometimes we hardly know with which we are dealing, sometimes it's clear, it must be a historic fact, or, it must be meant symbolically, sometimes it can be either or both, so perhaps this episode, or this series of episodes is of this latter kind. Perhaps it could be taken as historic fact, but also as possessing symbolic meaning. But, whatever the truth of the matter may be, the picture of Padmasambhava in the cremation ground, surrounded by the celestial maidens seems rather to have captured the imagination, we may say, of later generations of followers of the Tantric path. And this picture of Padmasambhava in the cremation ground with the Dakinis became, with the passing of time, richer and richer in spiritual content. Indeed, we can say that the symbol of the cremation ground and the symbol of the celestial maidens assumed, as time went on greater and greater significance, even individually.

And tonight we are going to try to feel something of that significance. First, we are going to consider the symbolism of the cremation ground, and the symbolism of the celestial maidens separately. Then we are going to consider them together, and finally, we may say a few words about Padmasambhava as frequenter of the cremation ground and companion of the celestial maidens.

So, first of all the symbolism of the cremation ground. Now, leaving aside symbolism for the moment, this is something rather sublime, leaving aside symbolism for the moment, associations, at least, of the cremation ground are fairly obvious. The most obvious association of the cremation ground, the idea that springs most readily to your mind, when the cremation ground is mentioned, is the idea, is the association of death. When you think of the cremation ground you think of death. When you see the cremation ground, you think of death. When you actually visit, as I have done, on a number of occasions, a cremation ground, and you look around you, you can't help thinking of all the people who've died and who have been cremated there. If it's an old cremation ground, cremated there in the course of hundreds and hundreds of years. And if you are very quiet there, and especially if you are on your own, and if you can feel this sort of vibration, this quiver in the air, that I mentioned earlier, you can, as it were, almost feel the presence of those numberless dead people, as it were pressing all around, - there is something there, something left, some trace in the atmosphere, in the psychic atmosphere, as it were. One feels, as it were, the hosts of the dead thronging round, even pressing round, - and in such a place, on such an occasion one cannot help reflecting in a rather sober and serious way, that everyone will die one day, including oneself. One can't help recollecting, one can't help realising that one day one's own physical body will be carried on the shoulders of the six or eight strong men to the cremation ground and burned there, and that one will have to leave behind possessions, relations, friends and so on for ever. One will recollect that little by little the physical body will be

consumed, will disintegrate, will sink into ashes.

Now, reflections of this sort, reflections proper to, the cremation ground, were rather systematically cultivated in early Buddhism. For obvious reasons, the disciple, the serious disciple was advised actually to go to the cremation ground, preferably at night and on his own. And he was advised, when he went there, just to look, to look at the remains of the people who had been cremated, look the remains of the dead bodies. And it would seem that in the Buddha's day cremation was not all that widespread. Very often, it seems, people's bodies were carried to the cremation ground, or rather in this case to the charnel ground and not even burned but just left there to rot, to decompose or to become a prey to wild beasts. So the visitor, the disciple, the neophyte visiting the cremation ground would see lying all around him not just the remains of cremated bodies, but bodies in various stages of decomposition. And he was asked not to shrink, not to shudder, not to turn away, but just look, just look at them, even to study them. And apply the lesson to himself, tell himself that his own body was equally liable to decay. And eventually, as this sort of practice became more and more systematised, the teachers, the meditation teachers started distinguishing ten stages in the decomposition of a corpse, or ten kinds of corpse in various stages of decomposition. And the disciple was asked to reflect on, to look at and reflect on each in turn. And at each stage, after looking at each kind of corpse, he had to tell himself, convince himself that one day his body too would pass through that very process. And this particular practise was known as the meditation on the ten stages of impurity of a corpse, and the word for impurity in Pali and Sanskrit is *asubha* or *ashubha*, which also means 'loathsome', 'disgusting' and 'unbeautiful'. And the practise of this corpse meditation in these ten ways led, it was said, to detachment, especially detachment from the body, and provided an antidote for craving.

So, let's just mention the ten stages or ten kinds of corpse, - give you some idea of what the early Buddhist were, in a sense, up against, how seriously they took their spiritual life, how radical, even how drastic they were in practice. One could see, in the cremation ground, in the charnel ground, it was said, swollen and bloated. You probably don't know, because you probably never have an opportunity of observing that, a few days after death, the corpse starts swelling on account of the gases which are produced inside. Then secondly, a corpse which is discoloured, which has become a sort of blueish green. And then thirdly, a corpse which is festering, from the apertures of which matter is flowing, which is rather unpleasant, - I must say, I've gone as far as this stage at least myself, and this is exactly what does happen. And then fourthly, a fissured corpse, a corpse which is split, maybe split in two, and then fifthly a mangled corpse, a corpse torn by dogs and jackals. Sixthly, a dismembered corpse, the limbs of which are scattered in all directions. And seventhly, a cut and dismembered corpse, one cut up into small pieces, presumably for disposal. And then eighthly, a blood-smearing corpse, or corpse streaming with blood. And ninthly, a corpse infested with, swarming with thousands of tiny worms, and lastly, the skeleton, just a few bones, that's all that's left. And this meditation on the ten stages in the decomposition of a corpse, the ten impurities, this meditation is still kept up in many parts of the Buddhist world, especially by monks. It's not always possible in these days, even in the East, even in India, to find corpses in all the different stages of decomposition, but it's generally considered sufficient, if one simply goes to the burning ground, or goes to the charnel ground and just looks, for a while, at the skulls and bones which are lying scattered there, or if one looks at the charred wood of a funeral pyre. If one is sensitive and receptive and aware, this will produce the same kind of effect, the same kind of result, the same kind of impression. Sometimes though, pictures are made, paintings are made of the ten stages of decomposition, the ten kinds of corpse. I remember seeing once a set of these pictures. I was once invited to a small Vihara, situated on the outskirts of Kalimpong. And a single old monk lived there. It was a Nepalese monk, and as far as I recollect, I was invited to lunch. And as I sat there, and as, in fact, I was eating my lunch, looking round I saw on the walls depicted, almost life-size the ten stages, the ten kinds of corpse, depicted in really gruesome and realistic detail. Now, if one practises this kind of meditation, the result is that eventually one starts seeing everybody that one meets as walking skeletons. You don't see flesh, you don't see blood, you don't see people, you see walking skeletons, just skeletons, just bone. And eventually you may get a sort of sign, as it is called, in a particular way appropriate to this practice, where you just see bone. You'll see something white, bright, shining, as it were, pure, just bone, just that. And that becomes the object of your concentration and meditation in the next stage of practise and experience. Now, this type of practice, the whole type

of practise, corpse meditation, meditation on the impurities of a corpse, is not suited to everybody. It is said that one should take it up in the full manner only if one has rather strong nerves.

And this brings us to another association of the cremation ground, fear and terror. As I have mentioned, cremation grounds are very lonely places, situated on the outskirts of the town, or situated even at some distance from the town, they may even be some miles away, on the edge of the forest, on the edge of the jungle, or by the side of the river. And we find that no one likes to go there on their own, especially at night. No one likes to pass even very near, especially at night, rather as with isolated country church yards, even in this country. And amongst the local people, amongst the village folk, there are all sorts of superstitions, all sorts of stories about the cremation ground. Some people passing a little near, perhaps, long ago, might have seen, or reported that they had seen, ghosts, or heard voices, or felt strange uncanny sensations, as they were passing near. So the result is that nobody goes near the cremation ground, people keep away, except, of course, in broad daylight and when you have the company of scores of other people, even hundreds of other people, when there is a funeral and actual cremation.

But suppose, suppose, one was of such a nature that one wanted to overcome fear, wanted to conquer fear. Suppose one was of such a nature that one wanted to become completely fearless. Now, where would such a person go? Well, he'd go, according to the Tantric tradition, to the cremation ground, because that's what everybody is afraid of, including himself. He'd go to the cremation ground. And he'd go there at night, preferably when there was no moon, when it was completely dark, - and he'd go alone. And we find, in fact, yogis in India doing just this, going to the cremation ground at night alone and staying there, staying there all night, sometimes even living there, for days, weeks, months on end with nobody coming there, alone in the cremation ground. And they do this in order to overcome fear. In order to overcome fear they force themselves, as it were, into the very situation in which fear is most likely to arise. And in this fear they are able to deal with the fear, they deliberately induce the fear, they allow themselves to experience the fear, - there it is, right in front of them, as it were. And because it's there, they can deal with it, they can overcome it, they can become eventually fearless. And we find that in Buddhism, generally, great importance is attached to the state of fearlessness. This is not a Buddhist virtue we hear very much about, but it figures very prominently in the scriptures, and we find that the Buddha himself, when he is depicted, in three-dimensional form, as an image, is often shown in what is called the 'abhaya mudra', the mudra, or the finger gesture of fearlessness. He is saying, as it were, 'fear not', 'don't be afraid', - showing the abhaya mudra, and the abhaya mudra is like this, - 'don't be afraid', 'fear not'. Not only the Buddha, but Bodhisattvas too are regarded as embodiments of fearlessness. This is greatly insisted on in the case of the Bodhisattvas that they have great confidence, great courage, great enterprise, great spirit of adventure, that they are not afraid, that they are firm of heart and so on. In fact, one can say that in Buddhism, generally, in the Hinayana, in the Mahayana, in the Vajrayana, in all forms of Buddhism, in all spiritual traditions within Buddhism, great importance is attached to what we may describe as the heroic virtues, that is to say courage, self-confidence, self-reliance, energy, initiative, - and we don't always realise this, certainly not here in the West. We tend to think of the spiritual life primarily in terms of the more passive, so-called, feminine virtues. We think of the spiritual life in terms of developing love, compassion, patience, sympathy, tolerance, gentleness, - we think of it more in these terms. But, according to Buddhist tradition, the heroic virtues are no less important, even, perhaps, in some ways, more important. And the cremation ground, we may say, is regarded as the breeding ground for these virtues, we can even say, regarded as the training ground for these virtues, for fearlessness and all the other heroic virtues.

And in this way, for such reasons as this, the cremation ground comes to be regarded as a sort of spiritual centre, comes to be regarded as a place for the development of heroic virtue, heroic emotions, heroic spiritual attitudes. And this is true for Buddhism in general, perhaps true for Hinduism in general, and certainly true for the Tantric path in particular. The cremation ground is the place where one comes face to face with everything that one usually avoids. The cremation ground is the place where one comes face to face, first of all, with death. You see right in front of you, in the most concrete, even the most repulsive form. You force yourself to look at it. It's the place where you come face to face with fear, where you feel terribly afraid, where shivers, perhaps go up your spine, and you just have to remain with it experiencing that fear, fighting with

it, overcoming it, conquering it. It's the place also where you come face to face with loneliness, where you are all on your own. For miles and miles no other human being. There you are in the cremation ground at night, with death, with fear, on your own, isolated. So you come face to face with loneliness in the cremation ground. And you come also, sometimes, face to face with insanity, you may feel as though your reason is breaking down, as though you can't stand it any more, - it's too much. It's overwhelming you, you are cracking up. You may at least have to come face to face with that possibility, see that it could happen. And one comes face to face in the cremation ground with oneself. You know yourself, you know your weaknesses, you know your strength, you know who and what you are. And more than that we can say: the cremation ground is the place where the yogi, especially the Tantric yogi, deliberately seeks out where other men avoid, he doesn't wait for death to come to him, doesn't wait for the corpse to pass by in the street outside, he goes and seeks out death, goes looking for death, seeks out fear, he even courts them, he, as it were, invites them: 'Come on, do your worst, I'm ready'. So, the cremation ground represents, as crucial situation, a situation of crisis into which one deliberately plunges oneself, a situation in which one is forced, one is compelled to change, a situation in which one must either develop or die. The cremation ground, therefore, is a symbol of transformation, symbol of transformation from lower to higher, symbol of transformation of one's whole being from the depths right up to heights, a symbol of the transformation of the whole system of consciousness. We are what we think, we are our consciousness, we are our states of mind. So the cremation ground symbolises the transformation of all this, the transformation of the system of consciousness.

And this aspect of the symbolism of the cremation ground is especially elaborated in what are known as the eight great cremation grounds. All over India there are cremation grounds, every village has a cremation ground, every town has two or three. There are hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of cremation grounds up and down the length and breadth of India. Where there are human beings, there is death, where there's death, there's a cremation ground. But in India, traditionally, out of all these cremation grounds there are eight that are especially famous, especially renowned, situated in different parts of the country. And these eight great cremation grounds were places where yogis and Dakinis regularly met in a sort of concourse, places where initiations were given at night in darkness and secrecy. And these eight great cremation grounds are often represented in the mandala. I'm not going to say anything about the mandala at the moment, - I gave a lecture on it some years ago, - but if one looks at the mandala, almost any mandala, - what does one see? The mandala is surrounded by a circle, by a halo of flames, blazing, burning, and within the flames there's a circle, or, if you look at it three-dimensionally, a wall of vajras, diamond sceptres, thunderbolts. Within the vajras there is circle of lotus flowers, pink and white, and within the lotuses, we find the eight great cremation grounds depicted in the mandala. There is one cremation ground for each of the four cardinal points, and there is a cremation ground for each of the four intermediate points. So eight altogether. And they are depicted usually when the mandala is painted on a scroll, depicted very vividly. There are skulls, there are bones, there are corpses, there are burning funeral pyres. And against this macabre background one sees the yogis and the Dakinis meditating, dancing, embracing, drinking and so on. Now, the fact that there are cremation grounds in all eight directions is significant, - all eight directions of space, in a sense, everywhere it suggests that there are cremation grounds, everywhere, suggests the whole earth, in fact, is one vast cremation ground, that the whole universe is a cremation ground, that the whole of conditioned existence is a cremation ground, because it's place of death, a place of fear, a place where we are confronted by death, a place where we are confronted by fear, a place where we have evolve or perish. Life itself, it seems that this symbolises is telling us, life itself, which is death in life, if you like, life in death, life itself, is the crucial situation, a situation into which we thrust ourselves, as it were, when we take birth as a human being. But the eight great cremation grounds also have a more precise meaning. They represent the transformation not just of the system of consciousness in general, but of the eight consciousnesses, the eight consciousnesses, that is to say, which are enumerated as the basis of their teaching by the Yogacara school of Buddhism.

So let's take a brief look at these, these eight consciousnesses. The first five are simply the five sense consciousnesses, that is to say consciousness, or discriminating awareness to translate Vijnana more directly, discriminative awareness through the eye, of form and colour; through the ear, of sound; through the nose, of smell; through the tongue, of tastes; through touch of heat,

cold, hardness and softness. So these are the first five, the five sense consciousnesses, or five discriminative awarenesses of sense. And then sixthly, there is mind-consciousness which means, discriminative awareness through mind of ideas. In Buddhism, as I think, I have observed before, the mind is usually regarded as a sort of sixth sense. It isn't given a very prominent or eminent position. And seventhly, there is the defiled mind consciousness, the mind consciousness defiled, that is to say, by a dualistic outlook. This mind, this mind consciousness, the defiled mind consciousness, interprets, is experienced in terms of a subject and an object, of an external world out there and an ego-self here. The defilement consists in this erroneous interpretation. And eighthly, there is the store consciousness which has two aspects, relative and absolute. The relative aspect of the store consciousness consists of the impression left by all our past experiences, not only in this life, but in previous lives. It's called store consciousness, because it represents the level, as it were, of mind at which all these impressions are stored up, - something like, we may say, perhaps Jung's collective unconscious. The store consciousness in its absolute aspect is reality itself, pure awareness, one mind, no object, no subject, one mind. So these, very, very briefly, because we are not really dealing with this subject this evening, are the eight consciousnesses. I dealt with them in greater detail six years ago in a lecture on 'Depth Psychology of the Yogachara', which is the third lecture in a series on 'Aspects of Buddhist Psychology'. And as we saw then, and a few of you, I know, were present at that lecture, and many may have heard it since then on tape, as we saw then, the Yogacara school of Mahayana Buddhism, like the Tantra, is concerned primarily with direct experience, direct spiritual experience, - and it's especially concerned with the experience which it calls the 'turning about', or the turning about, paravriti. And this turning about or turning around is a sort of overwhelming spiritual experience that takes place in the very depths of one's being at the level of the store consciousness. And as a result of this experience one's whole being is changed, turned around, turned upside down, transformed, the whole system of consciousness is transformed, the eight consciousnesses are transformed. And the transformation consists in, or we may say, the transformation is symbolised by these eight great cremation grounds. They symbolise the transformation of the eight consciousnesses.

But there is a little question which arises: what are the eight consciousnesses transformed into? They are transformed, the eight great cremation grounds symbolise that transformation, the transformation of consciousness, of the eight consciousnesses, but what are they transformed into? The short answer is: they are transformed into wisdom, discriminative awareness becomes wisdom, pure awareness, transformed into the five wisdoms or five awarenesses. The five sense consciousnesses are collectively transformed into the all-performing wisdom, the wisdom of Amogasiddhi, the green Buddha. Mind consciousness is transformed into distinguishing wisdom, the wisdom of Amitabha, the red Buddha, defiled mind consciousness is transformed into the wisdom of equality, the wisdom of Ratnasambhava, the yellow Buddha, relative store consciousness is transformed into mirror-like wisdom, the wisdom of Akshobya, the dark blue Buddha, and the absolute store consciousness, of course, is not transformed at all. It doesn't need to be transformed. And this absolute store-consciousness corresponds to absolute wisdom, the wisdom of Vairocana, the central Buddha, the white Buddha. So we can see now that there are many different aspects to the symbolism of the cremation ground. And all these aspects are connected. The cremation ground stands for death, it stands for fear, it stands, too, for fearlessness, in fact, it stands for all the heroic emotions. The cremation ground is the spiritual centre, it's the place where heroic emotions are cultivated. The cremation ground is the crucial situation, deliberately sought out. The cremation ground is the earth itself, as the theatre of death and destruction, as the arena for spiritual development. And the cremation ground symbolises that process of transformation, of radical transformation in which the spiritual life itself consists. And this transformation, as the Tantra again and again insists, comes about only as a result of direct experience.

So much then for the symbolism of the cremation ground. And against this background, against the background of the cremation ground, there now rises a mysterious figure, the figure of the Dakini, the celestial maiden. And it's to the figure of the Dakini, the celestial maiden, that we now turn. The word Dakini is derived from a Sanskrit root meaning 'direction', 'space', 'sky'. The masculine form of the noun is daka. Dakini was rendered into Tibetan when Tantric texts were translated into the Tibetan language, as 'kaduma', which is usually translated again from Tibetan into English as 'skywalker', 'walker in the sky', 'walker in space'. Empty space represents, as we

saw, some weeks ago, absence of obstruction, space therefore represents freedom of movement. If space is absolutely empty, you can move freely in it, in any direction. So, the Dakini, represents, we may say symbolises, complete freedom of movement. The Dakini, or the daka, for that matter, is not really someone who walks or flies in the sky, in space. The Dakini, or daka is someone who enjoys complete freedom of movement. Space or sky represents mind, represents mind in its absolute aspect. So the Dakinis, or the celestial maidens, represent that which moves about freely in mind. So what is it that so moves, that moves about freely in mind? In absolute mind? What moves about are the energies of the mind itself. The Dakinis, we may say provisionally and poetically at this stage, are the thrills or tremors of emotion that pass quivering through the mind, or that rise up, indeed, from the depths of the mind. We'll go into this in a minute. In developed Tantric Buddhism, especially in its Tibetan form, there are said to be three kinds of Dakini, or rather, three orders of Dakini and they represent three different levels on which the Dakini principle, as we may call it, is experienced, some higher, some lower. First, there is Dakini as female Buddha form. The enlightenment principle, Buddhahood, we know, in Buddhism was usually represented under the form of a perfect human body, usually sitting cross-legged as though in meditation. And the body was usually a male human body, but there is no logical reason why it should be male rather than female, and in this case, the case of the Dakini, the female Buddha, it happens to be female. We'll be dealing with this kind of Dakini, Dakini as female Buddha, in our last lecture, when we speak of the symbolism of the five Buddhas, male and female. Secondly, the Dakini as embodiment of one's own upsurging energies. This is the kind of Dakini with which we are mainly concerned tonight. Thirdly, Dakini as spiritual companion. We said something about this kind of Dakini last week, when we saw that she represents the esoteric Tantric form of the third refuge, that is to say, the refuge in the Sangha, or spiritual community. So, these are the three kinds of Dakinis, female Buddha, one's own upsurging spiritual energies, spiritual companion. But, a fourth kind of dakini is also sometimes mentioned, this is Dakini as prostitute, - and in modern Indian languages, in some modern Indian languages, Dakini is the common word for prostitute. And obviously, this represents a sort of warning of what may happen, if Tantric principles are misunderstood and misapplied.

Now, at the very beginning of the series it was emphasised that the Tantra is concerned, above all, with direct experience, direct experience of what one really and truly is in the depth of one's being, concerned with direct experience of, what we can only call, just using a word, reality. But this experience, the experience of oneself, contact with oneself, in the depth of one's being, this is not easy to obtain. Experience of reality is not easy to obtain. And what holds us back? Lack of energy. To achieve this experience, the experience of oneself, experience of reality, requires a tremendous charge, almost an explosive charge, of energy, requires all one's energy. So the question arises: where is one's energy? Where has one's energy gone? For the most part we have to admit, our energy is scattered, dissipated, allowed to leak and drain away, submerged, so that we have to admit that there are enerGIES rather than enerGY. So all these energies, these scattered, dispersed, dissipated, leaking away energies have to be gathered around one, gathered together, have to be conjured up from the depths, have to be merged into a single stream. And these energies are the Dakinis. The Dakinis are these energies. Now, one could say much about Dakinis in this sense from a psychological point of view, one could expatiate on them at length, in very Jungian, perhaps pseudo-Jungian terms. But I am not going to do that. I am going to do something rather different.

I am going to give a description of one particular Dakini figure, a Dakini figure who occupies an important place in the Tantric path, as followed, as practised in Tibet. And this Dakini is known as Sarva-Buddha Dakini. 'Sarva' means 'all', 'Buddha', of course means 'enlightened ones' in the plural, - so 'Sarva Buddha Dakini' means the 'Dakini of all the Buddhas', the Dakini of all the enlightened ones, - and she represents, this figure of Sarva-Buddha Dakini represents the embodiment of all the energies of all the Buddhas. In other words, she represents the energies that have carried all the Buddhas, past, present and future to enlightenment, so Sarva-Buddha Dakini is a very powerful figure indeed. And what does she look like? To begin with she stands upright, she is not sitting down, she is not meditating, she is standing there, and she is standing there with her legs wide apart and slightly flexed. And she is moving towards the right and her breasts, which are very, very full are thrust out, and her head is tilted right back. The right arm hangs a little out from the side, and the left arm is raised well above her head and bent back, the

hand almost touching the head. And the whole figure is red in colour, brilliant red. And the whole figure is completely naked. She wears only a few ornaments, ornaments of human bone. And especially she wears an enormous garland of human skulls that hangs right down below her knees, and she has, moreover, long dishevelled tresses flying out in all directions. And in her right hand she holds a chopper with a vajra handle, and in her left hand she holds a skull-cup filled with blood. And she is lifting up the skull-cap and she is pouring blood into her open mouth, and she is drinking it with evident enjoyment. And her face wears what is called a wrathful smile. And she has three eyes glaring, one in the middle of her forehead, and she wears a crown, a crown of five human skulls. And on her left shoulder, lying horizontal, and passing behind her upturned head is a long staff. And from the top of the staff there hangs down a small hand-drum, the damaru with streamers. And the head of the staff is formed by the vase of initiation. And the vase of initiation is surmounted by two outstretched wings. And above, above the outstretched wings are three human heads, one on top of the other. First, a head freshly severed, then a head that's been severed some time and has begun to dry out, gone yellow, and on top there is just a skull, the third head is a skull. And on top of the skull there stands upright a vajra. And the Dakini, Sarva, the Dakini tramples under foot two figures, one figure is red, the other black. Each has four arms. The red figure holds a skullcup filled with blood, and a staff like the Dakinis. The black figure holds a small hand drum and a kind of cutlass, a curved sword. Each has one pair of hands raised in supplication. And this figure, this red figure, this naked red figure of the Sarva-Buddha Dakini is surrounded by a halo of flames. So, this is Sarva-Buddha Dakini, the Dakini of all the Buddhas.

Now, I am not going to say what she means. The figure should have made its own impact. But I want to elaborate just a little on some aspects of the symbolism to suggest a few associations. First of all, the Dakini is red in colour. Red, is the colour, in Tantric Buddhism, of love, the colour of passion. We will go into this the week after next, when we consider the symbolism of colours and mantric sound. Red is the colour not only of love, not only of passion, it's the colour of what we may describe as emotional arousal. And in the case of the Dakini, in the case of the Sarva-Buddha Dakini, in fact, in the case of all the celestial maidens, in one way or another, the arousal, the emotional arousal, is total. So blood suffuses, as it were, not only the face, but the whole body, the whole body is the colour of blood, the whole body blushes, as it were, crimson, the whole body is red. So the Dakini represents the state of total emotional involvement, total emotional involvement in the spiritual life. And this is why also the hair of the Dakini is dishevelled. She doesn't care any more, she lets it fly to the winds, as it were, doesn't care anything about decorum, doesn't care about keeping it tidy, doesn't care about what people may think, doesn't care about what people may say. She just abandons herself, she's abandoned. And sometimes it's said that the Dakini throws into the spiritual life, or what is represented by the Dakini throws herself, or itself, into the spiritual life just as a passionate woman flings herself into the arms of her lover. Usually, of course, we know people find it very difficult to give themselves in this sort of way, not only to the spiritual life, but, in fact, to anything, find it very difficult to plunge right in, commit themselves, be totally involved, all their emotions into it. And as a result they don't achieve very much in any direction, and they certainly don't develop, don't evolve. And in many cases, people can't give themselves in this way, because they are just emotionally blocked. So they have to learn to loosen up, to free up. They have to get their emotions flowing much more freely, and flowing ultimately all in the direction of enlightenment. So this is what the red colour of the Dakini suggests, suggests, we may say, that one should not be afraid in the spiritual life to feel.

And then again, the Dakini is naked. She's concerned only with direct experience. She's concerned only with reality, with truth. She has nothing to hide. She's completely open, completely honest. We may say that nakedness in general figures rather prominently in Tantric symbolism. Yogis, dakas, Dakinis are often depicted in Tantric art naked, even, and this is very scandalous from the point of view of, say, Theravada Buddhism, or even Zen, even Buddhas are shown naked. And this is in keeping, we may say in keeping with the whole overall emphasis on the Tantra, which is on something direct, unveiled, open, radical. The nakedness which is here represented is, of course, spiritual nakedness, nakedness of being, but we can say that even literal nakedness is not without its significance, not without its value. And I am reminded at this point about a famous story concerning the 'beat' poet Alan Ginsberg. I thought at first that it was just a story, the sort of story that is made up about people. So when I met Alan Ginsberg on one

occasion I asked him whether it (?) was true story or not and he said: it's a true story, and proceeded to recount it to me. What happened was this: Alan Ginsberg apparently had been reading some of his poems at a big public meeting in California and after reading he was talking, he was talking about this and that and he was answering questions. And as he was speaking, every now and then he had used the expression 'the naked truth' or 'the naked reality', and he used this expression 'the naked truth, 'the naked reality' quite a number of times. So in the end the inevitable intellectual asked him: Mr. Ginsberg, what do you mean by the naked truth'? What do you mean by 'the naked reality?'' So Ginsberg just looked at him, didn't know what to say, didn't know what to say at all, so standing up there on the platform he simply stripped off all his clothes and he said: 'that's what I mean by 'the naked truth'. So, this, we may say is using nakedness as a sort of shock therapy, jolting the questioner's mind from the abstract to the concrete, bringing him back to reality, in fact.

Now, the Dakini is not only naked, she is wearing an enormous garland of human skulls. Her head is, as it were, thrust up through this garland. And each skull, in the garment represents a dead body, after all no skull without a body. Each body, which was once alive, represents, life. So, the garland, the garland of skulls, therefore, represents the whole cycle of one's previous lives, one's previous births. The Dakini, the Sarva-Buddha Dakini is, as it were, breaking through, or bursting through, this cycle. There is, we may say, a powerful, almost a volcanic upsurge of energy, and this energy bursts through all previous psychological conditionings, bursts through the vicious circle of self-created and self-induced problems and leaves them all hanging there, like (?) garland of skulls, dead. And the Dakini not only wears a garland of skulls, she also wears various, rather delicately carved ornaments of human bone. And we may say that bone, or bones, figure rather a great deal in the Tantra. The Tantra, we may say, is rather fond of objects made of human bone. Here we have a trumpet made from a human thigh bone, this is blown on certain occasions, the kanglin, here we have the skull-cup, then there is the rosary made of little discs of human bone, and sometimes drums are covered with human skin. And the reason for all this, for this use of bone, is obvious, - bone suggests death, - and this is why most people are rather unhappy about handling bones, especially human bones. If you just passed someone a human bone, they may not be all that happy about taking hold of it. So the Tantra wants one to familiarise oneself with death. The Tantra wants one to overcome one's fear of death. So it encourages one to familiarise oneself with bones, especially human bones, encourages one to handle human bones, to use objects made of bone, especially in Tantric ritual, to wear ornaments of bone, to drink from a skull-cup. And this is, of course, what we see the Dakini doing, see the Sarva-Buddha Dakini doing. She's drinking from a skull-cup, and what does she drink? She drinks blood. She pours it into her open mouth. And what is this blood? Blood, we are told, represents great bliss. The blood represents the supreme spiritual ecstasy, the ecstasy of enlightenment. And in this way the skull cup filled with blood, in a way, epitomizes the whole symbolism of the cremation ground and the celestial maidens. The skull cup epitomizes all the associations of the cremation ground itself. And the blood epitomizes all the associations of the Dakini. The skull cup represents death, represents the void, which is a sort of spiritual death to the ego, represents reality. And the blood represents the great bliss, which arises in the heart of the Tantric when he faces death, when he plunges into the void, meets spiritual death, experiences reality.

So having considered the symbolism of the cremation ground and the symbolism of the celestial maidens separately, it's time we considered them, very briefly, together, and then concluded. So, the symbolism of the cremation ground and the celestial maidens. The cremation ground and the celestial maidens are very different. We can see that at first glance, one is rather terrifying, the other perhaps, rather attractive, not to say, fascinating. So one wouldn't expect to find them together. But, in fact, we do find them together, the cremation ground and the celestial maidens together, we find them closely associated. And why is this? What is the connection between them? The celestial maidens, the Dakinis represent our upsurging energies, the energies that we need for spiritual advancement, for spiritual life, the energies that will carry us one day to enlightenment itself. These energies are usually spoken of as female, as Dakinis, but really, they are no more feminine than masculine. As we saw, there are dakas as well as Dakinis. Now, the celestial maidens, the Dakinis, as well as the celestial youths, the dakas, frequent the cremation ground. That's where they sing, that's where they dance with Padmasambhava, in fact, with any yogi, anyone who cares to go there. But why the cremation ground, why could they not go to

some beautiful garden and dance there, sing there? Why the cremation ground? The cremation ground is, as we saw, the crucial situation, the crucial situation deliberately sought out, even courted. So, the Dakinis are the energies that arise once you are within the crucial situation. They can arise, in fact, nowhere else. And what does this mean? It means, in very simple terms, that we are capable of far more than we usually think. It's not a question of finding the energy and then with that energy doing the job, as we usually assume. It's rather a question of taking up the job, knowing that the energy will just come. It means plunging ourselves into the crucial situation, knowing that the emotional upsurge from deep within ourselves will be there. It means taking our seat in the cremation ground knowing that the Dakinis will then gather round. But to do this, to take our seat in the cremation ground, to plunge ourselves into the crucial situation deliberately requires tremendous courage, tremendous confidence. But it's just this very thing that Padmasambhava did. It's just this very thing that every Tantric yogi, whether literally or symbolically, does. The Tantric yogi, the follower of the Tantric path, the Tantric path to enlightenment, lives in the cremation ground, with everything that that implies, he lives there with the Dakinis. From the Tantric point of view this living in the cremation ground with the Dakinis is the essence of the spiritual life. And hence the popularity of this scene, the scene of Padmasambhava and other yogis living in the cremation ground with the Dakinis, the popularity of this scene in Tantric art. But when Padmasambhava is depicted in this way, he is not depicted in his most familiar form. We don't see him wearing his princely robes, or wearing his lotus cap, etc. He is depicted in what is called his heruka form, he is depicted, that is to say, as a naked yogi. And he is seated, perhaps, on a carpet of human skin, or perhaps on a pile of human bones. And on all sides there are dead bodies, on all sides there are blazing funeral pyres, and he rattles in one hand a small hand drum, the symbol of fearlessness. And he drinks wine from a skull cup, symbol of the great bliss. And all around him are the Dakinis, some are dancing, some are singing, some are flying through the air, some are encircled by rainbows, some are embracing him. And the atmosphere of the place, the atmosphere of the cremation ground is awe-inspiring and sublime. And the mood of the yogi, the mood of the naked yogi is fearless and heroic. And he is the human consciousness itself. He is the human consciousness deliberately seeking out the crucial situation, the human consciousness face-to-face with death, face-to-face with fear, face-to-face with reality. He is the human consciousness surrounded by its newly awakened energies, the human consciousness aware of its own strength, the human consciousness determined to follow the Tantric path, the human consciousness determined to gain enlightenment.