

Lecture 108: the Symbolism of Offerings and Self-sacrifice

There is much that could be said about the Buddha's teaching, about the Dharma, said from a number of different points of view, but one, at least of the most significant, one, at least, of the most weighty things that can be said about it, is that the Buddha's teaching is a communication, that is to say the Buddha's teaching is a communication from one individual to another. It's a communication, essentially, from an enlightened human being, an enlightened individual, a Buddha, to an individual who is not, as yet, enlightened, not, as yet, a Buddha, but who is, nevertheless, potentially enlightened. And what we call the Buddhist scriptures are really, we may say, just so many records of that communication, that communication from the enlightened to the unenlightened individual, the enlightened to the unenlightened mind. And looking at some, at least, of these records which we call the scriptures, what is it that we see happening? We see first of all the Indian scene. We see the cloudless blue skies, we see, because this was 2500 years ago, we see the vast tracts of jungle, we see little paths making their way through the jungle. We see also at that time the Buddha walking from place to place, walking along the jungle paths, walking from village to village, sometimes even venturing into the towns, staying sometimes even on the outskirts of the towns. And as he goes from place to place, of course, on foot, the Buddha from time to time meets someone, some fellow traveller. Or else we see not walking, not for the moment walking but sitting at the foot of a tree, possibly a great banyan tree with vast overspreading branches. Or again, we see him sometimes sitting at the door of a little palm leaf hut, even sometimes at the mouth of a cave. And as he sits there by himself, perhaps in the cool of the evening, we see someone coming to see him, perhaps someone just happening to pass by and having their attention arrested by the figure of the Buddha just sitting there calmly, peacefully, radiantly. But howsoever it happens there is a meeting. The Buddha meets someone, - and as the ancient Indian custom was, especially among wanderers, - and as it still is, in fact, - what are referred to as friendly greetings are exchanged. One usually asks after the other person's health. And after the friendly greetings have been exchanged, after the usual enquiries have been made, after, as it were, to some extent provisionally identities have been established, a discussion ensues. The Buddha and the person he meets start discussing serious things, and eventually the Buddha, as it were, starts teaching. The Buddha starts, we may say, communicating, when he finds the other person attuned and ready. And what is it that the Buddha starts communicating, what is it in a word in which the essence of the teaching consists. What the Buddha starts communicating is not just any idea, any concept, any philosophy, any view, any doctrine, not even any teaching strictly speaking. What the Buddha starts communicating is nothing else than his own experience, his own direct experience of enlightenment and the way leading to that experience. He may, of course, incidentally, in order to create a sort of medium of communication, he may speak about the Four Noble Truths, about the Noble Eightfold Path. We find him, according to the scriptures, speaking on these topics very frequently. or he may speak about mindfulness, about meditation, about the experience of higher states of consciousness, even about the various super-normal faculties which pertain to them, and even, if the listener is particularly receptive, he may start speaking, though not very often, start speaking about Nirvana itself, about the Ultimate, about the Absolute, about Reality. And according to the occasion, according to the temperaments, the background of the person to whom he is speaking, the Buddha may speak just a very few words, or, on the other hand, he may deliver a lengthy discourse lasting for several hours. On most occasions, at least according to those records that we call the scriptures, on most occasions the Buddha would, of course, speak in prose. But sometimes when the Buddha himself was particularly moved, or when the topic under discussion was of a particularly solemn nature, or when the listener seems to be extraordinarily receptive, then the Buddha would burst, as it were, into poetry, or at least, into verse. But whatever he said, and howsoever he said it, the Buddha would be communicating, in one way or another, directly or indirectly, he'd be communicating his own experience of enlightenment, his own experience of reality, communicating what it was that made him what he was, a Buddha, in short, he would be communicating himself, would, in a sense be giving himself in the course of that teaching, in the course of that communication. And what would be the effect of all this on the listener? What would be the effect of the communication? Well, to begin with, the listener might be anyone, the listener might happen to be a nobleman or a priest, might happen to be a wealthy merchant or a humble tiller of the soil, might happen to be one deeply versed in metaphysical subtleties, able to enter into all sorts of abstruse and abstract discussions, or one entirely ignorant of all that, might be a pious hermit, one who spent many, many years in penance, self-mortification, might be a robber. But whosoever the listener was, the effect of the Buddha's teaching, the Buddha's communication, the Buddha's self-communication

was almost always the same. According to the scriptures the listener would be deeply impressed and deeply moved, and on occasion completely overwhelmed. And sometimes the scriptures represent the listener as saying that he or she felt as though a great light, brighter than thousand suns had suddenly arisen in the midst of blind darkness, as though something which had been knocked over had been now set upright and stood erect and strong, as though they had been wandering astray and the path had now been pointed out. Some people, we find, according to the scriptures, when the Buddha finished speaking, uttered exclamations of wonder and delight. Others would be so deeply moved, so touched that quite spontaneously they burst into tears as soon as the Buddha finished speaking, and others who had something on their minds, maybe some crime committed in the past, some misdemeanour at least, would spontaneously confess it. And others again, sitting there listening to the Buddha, after he had finished speaking would experience a sort of profound spiritual convulsion, would feel themselves stirred right down to the very depths of their being, as though a sort of earthquake had taken place right at the very centre of themselves. And a few might even develop on the spot, as they listened to the Buddha, as the Buddha stopped speaking, develop a sort of spiritual, transcendental insight, would get a sudden glimpse of reality itself. And most of these people, most of these listeners, as a result of the Buddha's teaching, as a result of the Buddha's communication, as a result of what they had heard from the lips of the Buddha, would feel that they wanted to commit themselves, wanted to commit themselves to the Buddha, the ideal of enlightenment, to the Dharma, the way leading to that ideal, and the Sangha, the spiritual community of those following that way. In other words, in traditional language they would feel that they wanted to go for refuge. But we find that in the case of some of these people, even going for refuge was not enough. Even that did not fully express what they felt. The listener, the disciple, in Pali they are one and the same thing, *savaka*, the listener, the disciple felt that the Buddha had done so much for him, felt that the Buddha had opened his eyes, or rather his spiritual eye, his third eye, opened it to a whole new world of spiritual values, of spiritual experience, so felt therefore intensely grateful to the Buddha. And out of this feeling of gratitude, of love, of respect for the Buddha wanted to give something to the Buddha, wanted to do something for the Buddha. The person felt, the disciple, the listener felt that the Buddha has given him so much, in a sense had given himself, had given him, perhaps, a glimpse of reality, had given him, in a way, his own enlightened being to the extent that he was able to receive that. So the listener, the disciple wanted to give something to the Buddha. But what can you give to the Buddha? You can't give very much. What had he, or what had she to offer? Obviously, nothing spiritual. The listener, the disciple could offer only something material. So it happened that someone gave out of gratitude a piece of cloth, clothing, some, more imaginative, perhaps, gave a garland of flowers, or even a single flower, and others, those who were well-to-do offered even gardens and parks for use as retreats by the Buddha and his wandering disciples. In one of the lectures we hear that wealthy woman, after hearing a particularly edifying discourse, offered what the translators call her '*perour*'. I'm not quite sure what a *perour* is, but it's apparently made of jewels and is extremely valuable, anyway, she gave that. What the Buddha did with it we are not told. But, often it happened that at that particular time, at that particular moment, when he or she wanted to give to the Buddha out of gratitude, the listener had nothing to hand, to give. So what did such a person do? The usual procedure was that he or she invited the Buddha home to his house, or her house for a meal the following day and expressed their gratitude, expressed their joy in a very simple, human way simply by feeding the Buddha when he came the next day. And this is the origin of the traditional Buddhist practice of making offerings.

And it's with the symbolism of offerings and self-sacrifice that we are concerned this evening. Now, the Buddha lived as Buddha that is to say, as an enlightened individual, for 45 years, and then came what tradition calls the *parinirvana*, the final passing away, the dissociation of the enlightened consciousness from the physical body. But after the *parinirvana*, after the physical passing away of the Buddha people still felt intense gratitude towards the Buddha, felt gratitude for the teaching, if anything, as the teaching spread, as people found it more and more effective in practice they felt more grateful than ever. And they still wanted, even after the *parinirvana*, still wanted to express that gratitude. But the Buddha, having passed away was no longer present in the flesh to receive the expressions of their gratitude, to receive their offerings. So we find in the century or so after the *parinirvana* that the practice developed of making offerings, offerings which would have been made to the Buddha, had he still been living, making offerings to the Stupas, or rather making them to relics of the Buddha, ashes, fragments of bone and so on

enshrined in the stupas. Or even making them to the stupas in memory of the Buddha. And you may recollect that we dealt with the Tantric symbolism of the stupa in the course of the second lecture.

Now, this practice of making offerings to stupas is usually known in English books on the subject as 'stupa worship'. But it isn't really that. If anyone is being worshipped through the stupa, it's the Buddha, worshipped, if we can use that expression at all out of a feeling of gratitude, gratitude for the teaching. So we find that for several hundred years after the parinirvana stupa worship, as we may call it, was a prominent feature of all forms of Buddhism, a prominent feature, that is to say, of popular Buddhism. It occupied a very important place in the religious life, the practical religious life of the laity. As far as we know the monks were still not so much concerned with stupa worship. They devoted themselves rather to meditation. Now, we find, we know from literary records, archaeological evidence, we know that the stupas during this period were not only worshipped, the Buddha not only worshipped through the stupa, but we find that the stupas were also elaborately decorated. We find that they were festooned with garlands of flowers, they were hung with flags and banners, and bells, and, in fact, we find that they became centres eventually of great religious festivals. People would spend years upon years building a magnificent stupa and then spend months decorating it, then there'd be festivals going on for weeks and weeks, and during these festivals people would spend the whole day circumambulating the stupa, chanting and making offerings of various kinds, lighting lamps especially. So this sort of practice, this sort of cult, if you like, centring upon the stupa, was a very prominent feature of popular Buddhism in India for some hundreds of years after the parinirvana. But then, we find, a change took place. And what was that change? The change was that the Buddha image appeared. Now, there is no general agreement among scholars and historians as to exactly where the first image of the Buddha, the first representation of the Buddha in stone appeared. Some say it was in Gandhara, others in Matura, others even say that it was in Ceylon. But wheresoever it first appeared it very quickly became popular all over India and all over the Buddhist East. It was taken up by all forms of Buddhism. And the Buddha image had remained, as we know, popular right to the present, so much so that we can hardly think, nowadays, of Buddhism without the Buddha image. And for some people, perhaps not very well informed the Buddha image is Buddhism.

Now, the introduction of the Buddha image had important consequences for the whole of popular Buddhism. As a result of the introduction of the Buddha image stupa worship declined in popularity. Popular devotion was largely transferred to the Buddha image. It's not that the stupa was entirely neglected, in fact, it continued to be venerated right to modern times, but, for all practical purposes, the Buddha image became THE object, THE centre of popular worship, popular devotion. And the offerings which formerly were made to the stupas now came to be made to the images. Indeed we may say that after the introduction of the Buddha image offerings became more and more elaborate, not only that, but assumed a deeper and deeper significance.

So, it's to the significance, to the symbolism of these offerings that we now direct our attention. And we are going to consider the symbolism of offerings and of self-sacrifice first in the Hinayana, then in the Mahayana, and finally in the Vajrayana or the Tantra. And we'll consider the symbolism of the offerings and self-sacrifice in greater detail when we come to the Vajrayana or Tantra. So, first of all, symbolism of offerings in the Hinayana. The Hinayana consisted, originally, of quite a number of different schools. Traditionally there were 18 Hinayana schools, but only one of these survives as an independent entity, and that is the school known as the Theravada school or tradition of the Elders, - elders here means the elder monks, senior monks. And Theravada, as probably everybody knows, is that form of Buddhism which now prevails in Ceylon, in Burma, in Thailand and so on. And if we turn to these countries, if we visit these countries, or even read about them or look at picture books devoted to them, we find that in all these countries, in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand and so on, there are very many temples, beautiful temples. And in the temples there are enshrined an enormous number of beautiful Buddha images. And to these images offerings are made every day. And usually, in Theravada countries, only three things are offered. First of all lighted lamps or candles, then flowers and then lighted incense sticks. And the offerings are made by each person individually, usually there is no such thing as congregational worship. You go along in your way, at your time, at your own convenience, with your little tray of offerings and you offer them yourself directly, at the feet,

as it were, of the Buddha. And there may be a number of people making their offerings to the same image of the Buddha at the same time, or you may be on your own entirely. But as you offer each item you recite appropriate verses in Pali. And these verses remind you of the significance, if you like, of the symbolism, of what you are offering. For instance, when you offer lights, when you offer a lighted lamp or a lighted candle, you recite a little verse which says, incidentally, as part of the verse: 'I offer this light to the Buddha who is the light of the three worlds' - and this acts as a reminder, the Buddha is the light of the three worlds illuminating the three worlds, that is to say, the whole of mundane existence with the light of his wisdom, the light of his knowledge, the light of his supreme realisation. So this is the first thing that the offering of the light reminds one of. And then it suggests that one light, one lamp can be lit from another, in the same way that the Buddha has lit the lamp of wisdom in his heart, we too can light the lamp of wisdom in our hearts, lighting it, as it were, from the already kindled light which is the Buddha's wisdom. And we find in some ceremonies, on some occasions, in the Theravada countries that there are on the altar 37 candles, or 37 lamps. And these symbolise the 37 Bodhipakyadhammas, as they are called, or 37 practices leading to enlightenment. And in the course of the ceremony, each candle, each of the 37 candles is lit from a larger central candle which, of course, symbolises the Buddha. So here we see the symbolism of the offerings of the lamp or light in the Theravada countries.

And secondly, flowers are offered. Here there are quite a number of verses, one can usually take one's choice or even recite them all. And one of the verses, or one of the lines rather, tells us, or reminds us that the flowers which we offer are now fresh and bright and beautiful, perhaps with the dew still glistening upon them, but what will they look like later on? Even that very evening? They'll be dry, they'll be withered, perhaps even a little smelly. So, the verse goes on to remind us that all mundane things are like that, today bright, beautiful, attractive and so on, but tomorrow dry, withered, perhaps even malodorous. So the offering of the flowers is a reminder of the fact of the truth of universal impermanence, that nothing lasts, nothing stays, everything fades, everything flows, so that one should not be attached to anything, not hang on to anything, - experience, yes, enjoy even, but as it goes, and letting it go, not trying to hang on, not trying to cling on, wanting something is essentially impermanent to be made permanent, which is impossible. And at the same time underneath the flow, underneath the flux of transient things seeing just like the unmoved depths of the ocean, deep underneath the waves of the surface, seeing ultimate reality itself, unchanging, eternal, with which through the flux of phenomena one can be, if one sees deeply enough, looks deeply enough, in contact. So this is the symbolism of the flower offering in the Theravada.

And then thirdly, one offers lighted incense sticks. And here too there is a variety of verses for choice. One is reminded that the sweet fragrance of the lighted incense stick spreads in all directions, a little of it goes a very long way. Scent, we are told, is a very wonderful thing, that a tiny, tiny quantity, absolutely microscopic, can make itself felt over a very wide area. And it's just like that with the practice of the Dharma, the practice of the truth, practice of the teaching. You practise it even a little and there is an effect, an effect not only on you, an effect on your surroundings, maybe not very tangible, not very external, but all the time that you are practising, especially when your state of consciousness starts changing, it's as though what we can only describe as vibrations are being sent out into the surrounding atmosphere and spread and spread and spread in ever-widening circles, and have on others, other living beings, other centres of consciousness, whether they know it or not, a positive, a beneficial effect, a positive, a beneficial influence, so that people feel, as it were, something good around, - just as when incense sticks are lit you can feel, in the atmosphere, you can smell something pleasant, something fragrant in the atmosphere. So this is the symbolism of the lighted incense stick in the Theravada.

Now, there is an additional significance, or additional set of associations for these three offerings of the Theravada which you may have noticed. The offering of lights, whether candles or lamps, is especially associated with the Buddha, the offering of flowers is especially associated with the Dharma, and the offering of incense, lighted incense sticks, is especially associated with the Sangha. So this very briefly, very simply is the symbolism of offerings in the Hinayana, especially the Hinayana in its contemporary Theravada form.

Now, for the symbolism of offerings in the Mahayana. When we come to the Mahayana we find

that offerings are divided into two groups: internal offerings and external offerings. Internal offerings are represented by the five senses, the five physical senses, and external offerings are represented by the seven things which are offered, according to Indian tradition, to the honoured guest. Now, the five senses are, of course, sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. And each sense is represented by a particular object, a particular offering which is placed on the altar. Sight, the sense of sight is represented by a mirror, usually circular in shape and made of metal. Hearing is represented by a small pair of cymbals, or a bell. Smell is represented by an incense stick. Taste is represented by a sacrificial cake made of dough. And touch is represented by a roll of silk. And these five objects are placed, are arranged on the altar. Sometimes there is a sixth one added, the sixth item being a page of printed text, text, that is to say, of the scriptures. And the page of printed text represents the sixth sense, or mind. So, we can see quite easily the significance of these offerings, the five senses. They are a reminder, when we see the object representing them on the altar, a reminder that in the Mahayana at least, the senses themselves must be dedicated, must be devoted to the attainment, in other words, one must be dedicated, one must be devoted on every level of one's being, not just the mind, not just the emotions, but even the physical senses themselves, must be involved in the spiritual life, in one's progression to enlightenment.

Now, the external offerings of the Mahayana are represented, as we've already mentioned, by the seven things offered to the honoured guest. So, what are these seven things, according to ancient Indian tradition? The seven things are, first of all, water for drinking. Then water for washing the feet. Then flowers, then incense, then lamps, then perfume, and finally food. And sometimes an eighth item is added, and the eighth item is music. Now, these seven or eight external offerings of the Mahayana are based on an ancient Indian custom, tradition. Suppose, someone turns up at your house, that is to say, in India, in ancient, even in modern India. Suppose some visitor, or traveller turns up. How would you receive him? How do you receive him? How would you entertain him? Well, in the Buddha's day, even in modern times, when someone turns up, when the guest arrives, the traveller arrives, maybe coming a long way, maybe on foot, in the heat of the sun, he is usually very thirsty. So the first thing you do, when someone turns up, is to offer a drink of water. And, of course, if he's come on foot, maybe barefoot, his feet will be very dusty, so you offer him water for washing his feet. This custom, by the way, is still very much kept up. And then, when he's refreshed himself by having a drink of water and washing his feet, and when he's taken his seat inside the house, you welcome him by placing round his neck a garland of flowers. And then, after a few minutes you usually light a few sticks of incense, just to create a pleasant atmosphere and for the more practical purpose of keeping away the mosquitoes, which might otherwise bite your guest. And, of course, usually in India the guest stays a long time. You don't expect him to come just for an hour or two, you expect him to come for the whole day, if not for a week, maybe a month. There people are really hospitable. So, he is sure to be there when evening falls, - so what do you do? You light lamps, light lamps, and having lit the lamps, well, after a while you may sprinkle your guest with perfume, with scented water, because at the end of the day, in a hot climate that's very cooling, very refreshing. So you sprinkle him with rosewater or something like that. And then, when he's really relaxed and recovered from the tiredness of the journey, you serve food. And, of course, the traditional Indian way of serving is, you don't sit down and eat with your guest, you are far too busy looking after him. He sits down all by himself, and you, your wife, your children, all the other members of the family, they all serve. And there you are just sitting in the midst with everybody coming with little dishes and little delicacies on the dishes and you are just slowly stuffed, there is no other word for it. And then when you've been fed to absolute repletion, and have perhaps been given betel also to chew, if it's a fairly cultured family, especially if it's a family with a few teenage daughters, you'll be entertained with music. One of the young ladies will go and fetch her vina, or perhaps her sitar, nowadays, and she'll play. And you'll be entertained in this way. And, as I've already said, this whole procedure in India, nowadays, in many places, in many families is still kept up. And I may say, striking a note of reminiscence that I have experienced all this in many different parts of India quite a number of times.

Now, this might sound all rather exotic, and all rather oriental, but it isn't really so, because we can see that there are rather obvious parallels with our own, even contemporary Western customs and social practices. Because even here, even in the benighted West, if someone comes to see you, - what do you do? What happens? Well, just as in India, maybe not to the same extent, you

make him welcome. You may not offer a glass of water, you may offer tea instead or a cigarette. You may not offer water for him to wash his feet, you may instead ask him if he'd like to wash his hands. You may not light a candle or a little oil lamp you'll just switch on the electric light, though we know that in some circles nowadays electric light is out and candles are in fashion. And then, of course, you feed him, offer him food. And having fed him, after the meal, probably you'll put on a record. So even here, we have our own way of a treated and honoured guest. Now, coming back to the actual religious offerings, we find in Tibet even now, that on special occasions the seven external offerings, water to drink, water for washing the feet, and so on, are offered in kind. The actual things themselves are put there on the altar, they are arranged in a row on the altar. First, going from left to right, there are two bowls of water, one, of course, for drinking, one for washing the feet. Next there comes a bowl of rice with a flower stuck in it. Now, it so happens that there are not very many flowers in Tibet, not very many flowers grow there it seems. So the Tibetans generally use a big, flat, paper sort of seed that comes from the Flame of the Forest tree, and it's known as a white flower. And then next comes a bowl of rice with lighted incense sticks stuck into it, usually three in number. Then a lighted butter lamp, after that a bowl of perfumed water. And last of all a sacrificial cake on a plate. Or sometimes, instead of the sacrificial cake, there is a bowl of rice with a small fruit on top. If the eighth item, that is to say, music is added, then right at the end, you'll find a small pair of cymbals just lying there.

Now, these seven items are offered, as I have said, in kind on special occasions, are arranged on the altar in a row on special occasions, but on ordinary occasions you'll find seven bowls just filled with water. And these represent the seven external offerings of the Mahayana. But these seven external offerings of the Mahayana are offered in kind or simply in the form of seven bowls of water, the significance of the offerings is the same. It means that we are treating the Buddha as a guest, an honoured guest, we're inviting him, inviting him into our home, just as we might have invited him 2500 years ago, had we actually met him. And having invited him, once he takes his seat, as it were, in our home, we are giving him our best. We're expressing our gratitude for the teaching. And I may say that in the East very often people actually feel this, when they are making offerings. Whether it's the simple lighted candle, flower and incense stick of the Theravada, whether it's the more elaborate external offerings of the Mahayana, in the East, when people make these offerings, they feel very strongly, very deeply, they feel as though the Buddha is actually present. They feel as though they are entertaining the Buddha, actually receiving him. And sometimes, as I have seen myself, people can be very deeply moved indeed on such occasions, feeling that the Buddha is actually present, that they are actually making offerings to the Buddha, that they are entertaining the Buddha. And it may be, if we are honest, we have to admit, that it isn't very easy for us to enter into this sort of feeling. Perhaps to us it isn't even quite natural. If we don't find it easy, if we don't find it natural, we shouldn't force ourselves into it, but just try to appreciate how other people, people in the East, feel and understand the general principle involved, expression of gratitude to the Buddha for the teaching, and try to practise in our own way, in accordance with our own temperament and our own cultural tradition.

Now, I've said that when we make these seven external offerings to the Buddha, we are treating him as guest, as honoured guest. But there is more to it even than that. What is the Indian word, what is the Sanskrit word for guest? This is rather interesting: the Indian word, the Sanskrit word for guest is 'atithi'. So, what does 'tithi' mean, - tithi means a time of day, or a period of the day, and 'a' is simply a negative prefix. So, atithi means someone who does not come at any particular period of the day, or any particular time. 'Atithi' - guest, really means someone who may come at any time, who just turns up. And this is what happens in India usually, you don't make appointments, you don't say that you'll be there at such and such a time. The person may not know that you are coming at all, may not even have heard of you, may not even know you. You just turn up, unexpectedly, out of the blue. That's what makes you a guest, - atithi. So, the Buddha is just like that. The Buddha just turns up, just appears, if you like, descends. You can say, the world wasn't expecting him, the world didn't know that he was coming. He just turned up. So, what is the ancient Indian custom, when the guest, this unexpected guest, this guest out of the blue, turns up? What's the Indian custom? Well, the Indian custom is, you drop everything. You drop everything, you don't go to work that day, that would be ridiculous. How can you? You have got to entertain your guest. You drop everything. You may have been about to set off for the fields. You don't go, you ask somebody else to go. You might have been about to teach your

children, - you don't, you give them a holiday. You might have been about to go for a little walk, you don't, you stay. You drop everything, and you devote yourself entirely to your guest. You are completely at your guest's disposal, that's the old Indian custom. In fact, sometimes people say to you, even now: 'please treat everything in the house as your own, it's yours, I'm just here to serve you'. This is the Indian tradition, at least the old Indian tradition. And there is never any question of inconvenience, no one would dream of saying, 'Oh, how inconvenient, - fancy turning up like that, not giving me any notice', - no one minds, in fact, they are overjoyed. And I've even heard people say in India, especially in deep South, which is very religious and very traditionally minded, I've heard people say when a guest has arrived, like this, unexpectedly, out of the blue, when everything has been put aside, I've heard the head of the household say: 'I feel just as though God himself had come to my house'. This is how seriously they take it. So, we can now see what Buddha as guest represents.

Buddha as guest represents, as it were, the transcendental element, the unexpected, the unprecedented, the transcendental element suddenly erupting, as it were, into our hum-drum lives, breaking in, as it were, from some other dimension and taking us by surprise, maybe catching us completely off our guard. And the external offerings, the seven external offerings of the Mahayana represent our response to that eruption of the transcendental. They represent the fact that when the transcendental appears, when it breaks through, when it manifests, when it even takes us by surprise, we just drop everything that we are doing and attend only to the transcendental, attend only to the Buddha. And that means giving the best that we have, giving even everything that we have, giving out of gratitude, giving out of love, giving with joy. And this kind of giving, this spirit is symbolised by 8 beautiful figures, symbolised by the 8 offering goddesses. There's one goddess for each of the seven, or in this case, eight external offerings of the Mahayana. And these goddesses, these offering goddesses are frequently visualised in the course of meditation practice.

One sees, one feels emerging from one's heart 8 rainbows. And these 8 rainbows pass out through the crown of one's head. And having passed out they fan out. And at the end of each rainbow which is travelling upwards all the time, at the end of each rainbow there is a goddess, a beautiful 16-year old female figure, bearing the appropriate offering. And these 8 offering goddesses at the end of these 8 rainbows, they make their offerings, they offer their water for drinking, water for washing the feet, incense and so on, offer them to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who are visualised as all seated on lotus thrones in the midst of the sky. And these offering goddesses so bright and so beautiful at the end of the rainbows, they obviously represent something. They represent the essence of worship, represent the essence of the devotional attitude, represent, we may say, the powerful upsurging devotional feelings, very pure and very strong.

Now, from offerings, the symbolism of the offerings in the Mahayana, we come to the symbolism of offerings and self-sacrifice, in this case, in the Vajrayana, or in the Tantra. You probably noticed that the Mahayana offerings include those of the Hinayana, they don't exclude. In the Hinayana, in the Theravada, there are lights, incense, flowers. The same lights, incense, flowers reappear, in a slightly different way, slightly different context among the Mahayana offerings. And in the same way, in much the same way the Tantric offerings, the offerings of the Vajrayana, to which we now come, include the Mahayana offerings. At the same time, however, there is an important difference, an important development. In the Theravada, in the Mahayana offerings are made to the Buddha, to the Enlightened One, or rather we may say in the case of the Mahayana at least, to all the Buddhas and all the Bodhisattvas. Offerings are made to the Buddha principle, the principle of enlightenment in all its innumerable forms and guises. And this is true of the Tantra too, the Vajrayana too. Offerings are made to the Buddhas, to the Bodhisattvas. But in the Tantra Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the different manifestations of the one principle of Buddhahood or enlightenment are of two kinds, or rather manifest under two different aspects. And these two kinds of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, these two aspects are known as the Peaceful and the Wrathful, sometimes as the peaceful and the angry or fierce. With the peaceful aspect, of course, we are familiar with, we think of the Buddha, we think of the Bodhisattvas as calm, peaceful, compassionate, kindly, beautiful. But in the Tantra there is a wrathful aspect of every Buddha, of every Bodhisattva, an angry aspect, a fierce, even a terrible aspect. And the wrathful aspect represents enlightenment's function of the destruction of ignorance. And the invocation of, and meditation upon wrathful deities, as they are sometimes called, that is to say, that is to

say the wrathful aspects of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas occupies a very important place in Tantric Buddhism, especially in the esoteric Tantra, that is to say, in the anuttara yoga Tantra. And it occupies an important place. One is advised to look at the pictures of these wrathful forms, these wrathful deities, these fierce manifestations of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, to evoke them, to meditate upon them, to occupy one's mind with them, to be familiar with their forms for a very definite reason. Because such practices, such meditations, such invocations help develop what I've called one's heroic emotions, one's heroic virtues.

Now, in the Tantra, in the Vajrayana, the peaceful deities, or rather the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas under their peaceful aspect or in their peaceful manifestations are worshipped with the ordinary Mahayana offerings, that is to say, with the five objects representing the five senses, and with the seven items offered to the honoured guest, representing the seven external offerings. But, in the Tantra, in the Vajrayana, when it comes to the worship of the wrathful deities, there are specifically Tantric offerings. And these specifically Tantric offerings, offered in the worship of the wrathful aspects of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are, in turn, both, internal and external. Now, the internal offerings of the Tantra are represented by what is usually referred to as 'the flower of the senses'. The flower of the senses, when it's actually offered on the altar in ritual worship is made of dough. And it's realistically coloured. And what does it consist of, this flower of the senses? Well, it consists, in the first place, of a skull cup. And in the skull cup are some rather strange, not to say, unpleasant, objects. There's a human heart, there's a tongue torn out by the roots, a nose that has been cut off, a pair of eyes that have been gouged out, and a pair of ears that have been cut off. The heart represents sense of touch, the tongue obviously represents taste, the nose smell, the eyes, of course, sight, the ears hearing. And these five are all artistically arranged in the skull cup to form a sort of bouquet, or flower, the flower of the senses. And this is the first of the specifically Tantric offerings, all, of course, I hasten to remind you again, made of dough, realistically coloured. The meaning is the same as in the case of the Mahayana, the internal offerings, offerings of the senses, only it's much more dramatically expressed. The senses themselves, heart, tongue, nose, eyes, ears to be dedicated to enlightenment.

Now, what about the external offerings of the Tantra? These are not seven, but for some reason, six in number. First of all, there's what is known as a cemetery flower, which appears to be a flower that grows only in cemeteries where the dead are buried, a flower that blooms, as it were, out of the bodies of the dead, - so a cemetery flower, a flower plucked in a cemetery. And then, incense, but incense made of singed flesh. It's a very strange smell, the smell of singed human flesh, - I don't know if anybody has smelled it, but if one attends cremations, - and not the hygienic affairs which we have in this country, but cremations in India, where you actually see the corpse burning and smell it, - then the smell of singed flesh is something distinctive and never to be forgotten, so incense of singed flesh. And then a lamp made of human fat. Then scent of bile, beverage of blood, food of human flesh. So these 6 evidently represent an extension of the cremation ground symbolism with which we were concerned last week.

So these are the internal and the external offerings of the Tantra, made to the wrathful aspects of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. And in addition to the internal and external offerings there are also secret offerings of the Tantra, of the Vajrayana. And the secret offerings are five in number. And what are these? These are flesh, that is to say, of course, human flesh, heart, blood, brain, entrails. So these are the five secret offerings of the Tantra, of the Vajrayana. And their general significance is the same as that of the other Tantric offerings, only again more emphatic. The Tantra is trying to say, as it were, : it's not enough to have devotional feelings, it's not enough to feel, as it were, pious, grateful, even loving, it's not enough even to dedicate one's senses, even that doesn't go far enough. The Tantra is saying, as it were, you've got to offer your flesh, you've got to offer your heart, your blood, your brain, your entrails. The Tantra is saying, as it were, that you've got to be devoted, you've got to dedicate yourself, give yourself with your very guts, as it were. This is what the secret offerings represent.

Now, there's one more offering which must be mentioned here and that is what is called 'amrita'. 'Amrit' means the nectar of immortality, and this nectar of immortality symbolises enlightenment or Buddhahood itself. And it's represented on the altar by a skull cup filled to the brim with beer or spirits. And this, of course, also, is offered only to the wrathful deities, who are often represented in art as drinking it.

From the practical point of view, however, the most important Tantric offering is the offering of the mandala. And I'm going to describe this in some detail. What does mandala mean? Mandala has got here a rather different meaning from what one usually encounters. Mandala here simply means the whole universe, the cosmos, and especially it means the universe, the cosmos, as depicted in traditional Buddhist cosmology or cosmography. So, the offering of the mandala means the offering of the whole universe. When you offer the mandala, you offer the whole of material existence, the whole cosmos to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. So, evidently the offering of the mandala is a form of external offering. So, what does it mean? Why does one offer the mandala? Why offer the whole universe, as it were? It means, or it suggests that one's gratitude to the Buddha, one's gratitude to the Three Jewels is very, very intense, even overwhelming. One feels so grateful for what one has received that in return, if one can use that word, or in response, one would like to give everything that one has. Suppose you owned the whole world, suppose the whole of existence was yours, you feel so grateful that you want to give even that, everything, if it was all at your disposal. You could think of nothing better to do with it than just offer it to the Buddha. But, however one may feel one can't do this literally, but one can do it in meditation, which in a sense is doing it literally. The offering of the mandala, the offering of the whole universe in meditation according to the Tantra has the same value, if properly done, done in a heart-felt manner, the same value as the literal offering of the universe would have, because, after all, in the spiritual life, essentially, it is the intention and the attitude that count.

Now, the offering of the mandala, the offering to the Buddha, to the Three Jewels of the whole universe in worship is one of the four foundation yogas, the four mula yogas of the Tantra. And as such the whole practice occupies a very important place in Tantric spiritual practice. First of all, I am going to describe the mandala, and then describe how it's actually offered up. I've said that the mandala represents the universe. But not just the physical universe, rather the mandala represents a system of intersecting planes, intersecting dimensions, if you like, of being and consciousness, only one of which is identical with our own physical universe. Now, according to general Buddhist tradition, the mandala is said to consist, usually said to consist of 37 parts. Not that it consists only of these, but these are the most prominent aspects that you especially think of when you are concerned with the mandala. Probably the 37 parts represent a correspondence with the 37 practices leading to enlightenment, the 37 bodhipakyadhamma. Sometimes only 25 parts are enumerated, and in the list which I managed to procure from Tibetan sources contains 39 items. For some reason or other there are two extra.

What are these 37, or in this case, 39 items? 39 constituent parts of the mandala? First of all, the diamond ground, the adamantine ground, the foundation. In other words, reality itself is the basis of the whole of phenomenal existence, the basis of the cosmos, basis of the cosmic order, - the diamond ground. And then, two, the wall of iron, - this represents the outermost limit, or thinking, three-dimensionally, the outermost shell of this universe. And within this wall of iron, there are 7 concentric circles of golden mountains alternating with 7 concentric circles of ocean. I have no time to describe all this in detail, a general picture is enough. Thirdly, Meru, the king of mountains. This represents the central axis of this whole system of intersecting planes and dimensions, and it rises from within the 7th and last, that is to say, innermost, circle of ocean. Sometimes it's popularly identified with a certain mountain peak in the Western Himalayas, but this is a grave error, because it isn't identical with any earthly mountain at all. Below Meru are the lower worlds, worlds of suffering, purgatories, hells. Above Meru are the worlds of the Gods, and within Meru itself are four realms, the topmost one of which is inhabited by the Asuras or Titans who are always fighting with the gods. Now, items 4-7, the four islands or continents, - these are situated in the first or outermost circle of ocean, immediately inside the iron wall. There's one island, or one continent to the east, one to the south, one to the west, one to the north. The eastern continent is shaped like a crescent moon and it's white in colour and its inhabitants have crescent shaped faces and they are tranquil-minded and virtuous. The southern continent is shaped like a shoulder blade of a sheep, and it's blue in colour and the faces of its inhabitants are also shaped like a shoulder blade of a sheep. And in this island, in this continent riches abound and one finds there are both good and evil. This continent is said to correspond roughly to our own world. The western continent is round like the sun and red in colour, the inhabitants have red faces, they are very powerful in constitution, and they are greatly addicted to the flesh of cattle. The northern continent is square in shape, green in colour, and its inhabitants have square faces like the faces of horses. And they get all that they need from the trees that grow

there. Then 8-15, the eight subsidiary continents, two of these to each of the main continents, one on either side. And they are of the same shape as their parent continent. 16, the mountain of jewels. I'm not sure exactly where this is located in the total picture. 17, the wish-fulfilling tree, the tree for the possession of which the Titans are constantly fighting the gods. 18, the wish-fulfilling cow, the cow of plenty. 19, the magic seed, the seed from which crops grow without the necessity of cultivation. 20, the wish-fulfilling jewel. 21-26, the seven jewels, that is to say, the seven jewels of the universal monarch. Here, jewel means, best of its kind, or ideal. This is a very well-known list, consisting of the ideal minister, ideal treasurer, ideal horse, ideal wife, ideal elephant and so on. Then, 27, the wish-fulfilling jar, a sort of Aladdin's lamp. And this is sometimes considered identical with the vase of initiation. And then 28-35 the eight mother goddesses. These 8 mother goddesses live in their own heaven worlds, adjacent to the paradise of Indra. Then 36 and 37, the sun and the moon. The sun and the moon here are not just the sun and the moon in the literal sense, they are more like symbols of the yin and yang type of influences in the universe. 38, the ceremonial umbrella, umbrella of victory and sovereignty. This crowns the top of the whole system. And 39, lastly, a pennant. And this pennant flies from the very top of the umbrella. So, these are the 39 parts of the mandala, and between them they stand for, or represent, the whole multi-dimensional universe.

Now, then, for the offering of the mandala. As I have mentioned, the practice of offering of the mandala to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas is one of the four foundation yogas of the Tantra. I am going to describe it according to Nyingmapa tradition. First, one visualises the cosmic refuge tree, the cosmic refuge tree as it was describe the week before last in our fourth lecture. In other words, one visualises the glorious figure of the great Tantric guru Padmasambhava surrounded by the exoteric and esoteric refuges. Above the figure of Padmasambhava one sees the gurus of the purely spiritual lineage up to the Buddha Amitabha and the Adi-Buddha Samantabhadra. Below, one sees gurus, yidams, dakinis, dharmapalas and so on, in front the Buddhas of the three periods of time, past, present and future, behind the sacred books, the scriptures, and on either side the two wings of the Sangha. And one visualises all these figures, the whole of the cosmic refuge tree in the sky before one. And so visualising one recites the sevenfold Puja. Now, the sevenfold Puja that one recites on this occasion, in this context, as part of this particular foundation yoga, is not the sevenfold Puja that we usually recite. It's not the usual version. For this purpose, in this context, there is a special esoteric version. And with the help of one of my Tibetan teachers some years ago I rendered this into English for my own personal use, and I am going to read now that rendering. The esoteric version of the sevenfold Puja recited prior to the offering of the mandala: (it's very short, it's simple, but the meaning is profound):

'To that Trikaya, which is the true nature of all Dharmas, non-dual, limitless, profound and vast - I make obeisance. I worship the unmade, the unlimited, and the eternal. I make confession of the sin of not knowing that my own mind is the Buddha, rejoicing in the natural state, the self-aware. I request the Buddha to revolve the ungraspable, omnipresent and all-accomplished Dharmachakra. I pray that the mundane and the transcendental may be established in oneness. Whatever obeisance and worship I have performed, I transmute into the voidness. May all beings attain both voidness and great bliss.'

So this version, this esoteric version of the sevenfold Puja should be repeated prior to the offering of the mandala many times. And as one repeat, as one recites, one should feel that all living beings whatsoever are repeating it with one. And having done this one offers up the mandala, that is to say, the mandala as already described. First of all, one visualises it in one's heart, the diamond ground, the iron wall, the golden mountains, the circles of ocean, Meru, and so on, adorned with all the other items. One visualises it in this way within one's heart, and then offers it in worship to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, gurus, dakinis and so on of the cosmic refuge tree. But to visualise all this, even with a lot of practice, is very difficult. So, there is another way of doing it. One can actually, literally, concretely construct a simplified model of the mandala, a simplified three-dimensional model of the universe. And this practice is very common in Tibet and Tantric circles.

One takes a round metal base. It's rather like a deep round tray turned upside down, that is to say, with the bottom uppermost. And this represents the diamond ground of existence, usually one polishes it with a cloth a few times, and one says a mantra: 'Om vajra bhumi a hum', and you try

to realise, to feel that this is the diamond basis of the whole of existence, the transcendental ground underlying all phenomena, the ground on which the whole phenomenal world, the whole universe is built up. And on this ground one places a metal ring about one inch high. And this metal ring represent the wall of iron enclosing the whole universe. One then fills this ring with rice. When one has filled it with rice one places on the rice a second ring, smaller than the first, and this represents Mount Meru. Then one fills the second ring with rice, and on that rice one places a third ring, smaller still. You are building a sort of pyramid, you see, with steps. And this third ring represents the higher heavenly realm. Then one deposits in different directions on this structure a few grains of rice for each of the other 37 or 39 constituents of the mandala. And as one deposits the few grains of rice, one feels that one is adding to the mandala, to the total structure those items of the cosmos. And then finally one crowns the whole structure, the whole model of the universe with a flaming jewel, mounted in a sort of silver Dharmachakra. And then one offers, and the offering consists in simply lifting up this mandala that one has constructed, that one has created, lifting it up in the direction of the altar, in the direction of the figure of the Buddha or guru, or placing it on the altar. And this whole procedure from beginning to end is to be repeated 100,000 times.

But there is a still more simplified form of offering, if you haven't time for this, still more simplified. You see, there are different levels of practice for the full-timer, the one who can give a certain amount of time, the one who can give very little time. There is a still simpler form. In this form you simply fill the palms of your hands with rice. And then you make a mudra, - like this. And this is the mandala, and making this mudra with the rice in the palms of the hands, one recites certain verses. And these verses also I rendered into English some years ago, and I'll read them. The verses go: the ground is purified with scented water and adorned with flowers. It is adorned with the king of mountains, the four continents, the sun and the moon. Thinking of it as the Buddha-realm, I offer it to the Buddha. By virtue thereof may all human beings attain to the realm of bliss.

So, this is the simplest form of the offering of the mandala.

Now, having done all this, having offered the mandala, having offered the universe in effect, in intention, in attitude, one might think, there is nothing further to be done, nothing further to be offered, nothing, in a way, left to give, - you've given everything, the whole universe. And this is certainly true, so far as external offerings are concerned. But there is one thing left, one thing not offered. And what's that? You haven't offered the offerer. You've left him out. The one thing left is your own self, especially one's own body. And it's possible to give away the whole world, but that isn't enough. One must give oneself, give oneself to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, give oneself to other living beings. Because even though might offered up in worship, even 100,000 times, the whole universe, one only really gives when one gives oneself. And it's this giving of oneself, this self-sacrifice, if you like, especially sacrifice of one's physical body that is the subject matter of another Tantric practice, another Tantric exercise called 'chöd'.

I'll give a brief description, a very brief description of this practice and then conclude. 'chöd' which is a Tibetan word means 'cutting', 'cutting', - and it corresponds to the Sanskrit 'chedana'. It's the same word that we find in the title of the Vajracchedika Sutra, which is one of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, - the diamond cutter sutra, the sutra, the discourse, the teaching, the wisdom, the transcendental wisdom that cuts just like the diamond, but which cannot be cut, and 'Vajracchedika' is rendered into Tibetan as 'dorje Tshopa', tsho - the same word that we get here in chöd, cutting, practice. So, what is cut, what is there a cutting of in this practice? The cutting of ego, cutting of self in the more ordinary sense of the term, or rather cutting of attachment to ego, cutting of attachment to self, especially attachment to the physical body with which the self is much of the time identified. And this whole practice, the 'chöd' practice, the tradition of this practice is a Nyingmapa tradition, the Nyingmapas being the school, if you like, the tradition founded by Padmasambhava. The whole practice is rather elaborate, - I've only time this evening to describe the central part of the practice.

So, what happens? The Tantric yogi leaves the town, leaves even the villages, leaves his friends and companions, goes mile and miles away to a wild and solitary place, preferably to a haunted place, preferably, of course, to the cremation ground, which is where we found ourselves last

week. He goes, of course, completely alone. And he takes with him various articles which he will need in the ritual part of the practice. He takes with him the skin of a beast of prey, complete with claws, takes a miniature tent, takes a staff surmounted by a trident, takes a trumpet made of a human thigh bone, takes a small hand drum and a few other items. And having settled himself in that wild and solitary spot, in that cremation ground, perhaps, with the corpses round about, jackals, perhaps even with a sense of non-human being around as well, he starts upon various preliminaries to the practice. I'm not going to describe the preliminaries, - and he offers up after that a prayer to the guru, prayer, in this case to the great Tantric guru Padmasambhava. And he then turns his attention to his own physical body. He may look, perhaps, at bodies lying around, corpses lying around in various stages of decomposition. But he looks at his own body, and he imagines that he is dead, that his own body is a corpse. And the text says, he imagines that his own body is a fat, luscious looking corpse, and practising there, sitting there, or lying there, he has actually to feel that he is dead, that the body is a corpse, it's a dead body, which is lying there or sitting there. And he then feels his mind, his true mind as separate from the body, in fact, he visualises, he sees his own, true mind. He visualises his mind, his own true mind, as the knowledge Dakini, or awareness Dakini. And like the Dakini that we saw last week, she is red in colour, pure red. And she has three eyes, the third eye being the eye of wisdom, and she has a wrathful expression, and except for a few ornaments of bone, she is completely naked. And she holds in one hand a kind of chopper, and in the other a skull cup. And she stands apart from the body, apart from the corpse, she is separate. The physical body, the dead body, the corpse is there, one's own true mind in the form of the knowledge or awareness Dakini is there, separate, independent. And then, this Dakini figure, this terrible red Dakini figure proceeds to do something. You see her doing it, she does something with her chopper. She chops off the head of the corpse, your own dead body, she chops it off. And once she's chopped it off that severed head slowly turns into a skull. And the Dakini then places the skull, after turning it upside down, on top of three smaller skulls, in other words, she's made a sort of cauldron standing on three legs, the three smaller skulls being the legs and the big skull, the original skull, which was the head of the corpse, your dead body, as the cauldron. And then with her chopper she cuts up the whole corpse into bits. And she throws these bits into the skull cauldron as an offering to the deities. And then there are pronounced, the yogin pronounces certain mantras, and as these mantras are pronounced, the offerings, the bits and pieces of flesh and blood and bone in the skull cauldron are all transformed into amrita, are all transformed into nectar, the nectar of immortality. And the yogin then proceeds to invite the three jewels, the guardian deities and spirits of various kinds to come and partake of the feast, the feast of nectar, the feast of ambrosia. And as he invites them, he tells them that he is sacrificing his own physical body, because it's the physical body, he says, which is the root of duality, which makes you distinguish between subject and object. So, the yogin, in a very happy and triumphant and glad mood, in a heroic mood, if you like, invites all these beings, all these spiritual beings, high and low, to come and enjoy the ambrosia, the nectar in whatsoever form they please, peaceful or wrathful, peaceful or terrifying, as they please. And all this, the Tantric yogin actually experiences. It's not just an idea, not just words, not something you just listen to in a well-lighted room, it's something that you do, something that you go through, visualise, experience, as the Tantric yogin does, away from humanity, on your own in some solitary spot, in a cremation ground, where you conjure up all this terrifying imagery, get rid of your attachment to your own physical body. And there are some Tantric yogins who wander, all the time, from place to place, and whenever they find a wild and solitary spot, especially when they find a cremation ground, they halt there for a few days and they perform this 'chöd' practice, this practice of cutting, cutting the ego. And gradually an effect is produced, gradually they start feeling as though the body is dead. It's corpse already, and attachment to the body starts diminishing. They see, they realise that only the true mind exists, - whether in its red Dakini form or not, - only the true mind exists, pure and radiant and distinct from the body.

Now, not many people, especially not many people nowadays will be prepared to go as far as these Tantric yogis, these Tantric yogis of the Nyingmapa tradition. Not many people really want to sacrifice themselves in any sense. Not many people even will be found prepared to practice the offering of the mandala. But even so, it's important that we should understand or try to understand the principle involved, important above all, that we should try to understand the place of giving in the spiritual life, giving to the Buddha, giving to other living beings, important that we should try to appreciate, at least, the symbolism of offerings and self-sacrifice.