

Tape 115: the New Man Speaks - Edited Version

Two months ago, on the full moon night of the Indian month Vaishaka, we celebrated the Buddha's attainment of Enlightenment. Tonight, we are celebrating 'Dhammacakka Day', or, to give it its full title, 'Dhammacakkappavattana Day', the day commemorating the 'setting in motion of the Wheel of the Dhamma'--this being the traditional Buddhist idiom for the Buddha's initial promulgation of the truth that he had realized at the time of his Enlightenment. On this occasion, having gained Enlightenment, the Buddha brought out into the open, in the form of words and thoughts, the content of his transcendental realization on the night of Vaishaka purnima.

Two months ago we left the Buddha sitting cross-legged on a heap of grass at the foot of the Bodhi tree, enjoying the bliss of emancipation. Sitting there he had fulfilled, after many years of effort and struggle, the entire course of the higher evolution of the individual. He had defeated the forces of Mara and was now a conqueror. He had dissolved all mental defilements, resolved all psychological conditionings. He had seen the Truth, seen Reality. He had not just had a glimpse of the truth but now saw it steadily, all the time, having fully absorbed and assimilated it. He was now an embodiment of the Truth, an embodiment of Reality. He was Reality in human form. He was a new kind of being: a New Man.

A question now arises: what happened next? The Buddha has gained Enlightenment--humanity now has a Buddha on its hands. What does humanity do with the Buddha? And what does he do with himself?

At this point, something very mysterious happens. In a way that we cannot hope to understand, Enlightenment begins to communicate itself. In other words, the Buddha starts to communicate with other living beings: the New Man speaks. First of all, he simply speaks to himself; then he speaks to the gods; finally, he speaks to human beings.

As for what he says to himself, there are a number of different accounts of this first utterance, but they are substantially the same. According to the oldest Pali account, the Buddha speaks two verses--of which I must provide two different translations. Buddhadata's prose translation offers the more or less exact meaning, while Sir Edwin Arnold's verse rendering gives a better impression of the spirit:

'Many a birth have I traversed in this round of lives and deaths, vainly seeking the builder of this house. Sorrowful is repeated birth. Oh house builder, you are seen. Never again shall you build the house. All your rafters are broken. Your ridge pole is shattered. My mind has gone to dissolution. I have attained the end of craving.'
<Dhammapada 10, 8-9 (153-154) trans. Buddhadata>

In Sir Edwin Arnold's much more vigorous version we find:

'Many a house of life
Hath held me--seeking ever him who wrought
These prisons of the senses, sorrow-fraught;
Sore was my ceaseless strife!
'But now,
Thou Builder of this Tabernacle--Thou!
I know Thee! Never shalt Thou build again
These walls of pain,
Nor raise the roof-tree of deceits, nor lay
Fresh rafters on the clay;
Broken Thy house is, and the ridge-pole split!
Delusion fashioned it!

Safe pass I thence--deliverance to obtain.'
<Sir Edwin Arnold The Light of Asia, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1971, p.115>

These two verses constitute what is technically known as an Udana. The word udana means 'exhalation', 'a breathing out'. It also means that which is breathed out--something spoken under intense emotional pressure. Such utterances are always in metrical form. The Buddha is saying, 'I'm free, I've made it!' His six-year quest is complete. He has broken through. Looking back into the past over hundreds and thousands of lives and seeing where he had been going wrong, where the mistakes and delusions lay, it is not surprising that there should have been a tremendous upsurge of energy and emotion.

Next, the Buddha speaks to the gods--or, rather, speaks to Brahmasahampati, the 'Lord of a Thousand Worlds':

‘Opened for those who hear are the doors of the Deathless, Brahma,

Let them give forth their faith;

Thinking of useless fatigue, Brahma, I have not preached dhamma

Sublime and excellent for men.’ <Majjhima Nikaya I (Middle Length Sayings), Ariyapariyesana Sutta, trans. I.B. Horner, Pali Text Society, London, 1967, p. 213>

In order to understand this verse we have to refer back to the episode in which it occurs. According to the scriptures, after his Enlightenment the Buddha felt inclined to say nothing about it to anyone. He realized that the truth he had discovered went far beyond the capacities of the vast majority of people. He saw that people were immersed in craving and ignorance; they would not be able to understand the Truth even if he uttered it.

To Brahmasahampati, this was terrible. If the Buddha did not teach, he reflected, then the whole world would perish. It might progress materially, people might become prosperous and happy after a fashion, but there would be no value in it if the Buddha would not teach, if there were to be no spiritual element in their existence. So he appeared in front of the Buddha, like a great golden light, and begged him to make known to humanity the truth he had discovered. ‘There are just a few’, he said, ‘whose eyes are covered with only a little dust. For their sake, teach the truth you have realized.’

At that, the Buddha looked out over the world with his eye of intuitive insight. He then saw all the beings who made up the mass of humanity to be like lotus flowers growing in a lake. The vast majority were sunk in the mud beneath the water, but some had grown up a little so as to touch the surface. Just a very few were even standing completely free of the water. Seeing this, he was overwhelmed with compassion and decided that he would teach. It was at that point that he finally addressed Brahma in the words already quoted: ‘Open to them are the doors of the immortal’: open to humanity, open to those with just a little dust on their eyes. ‘Let them that have ears release their faith.’

One or two points here deserve comment. Firstly, the Buddha uses the term ‘immortal’. In early Buddhist texts we do not find the expression Nibbana; more often we find the Pali term amata (Sanskrit amrita). This word means ‘nectar of immortality’, the deathless, something above and beyond the changes of the world, above and beyond time. It is a sort of synonym for Nibbana, or Enlightenment. The Buddha has now attained Enlightenment; he has broken through into the Transcendental dimension of consciousness. Now others can follow his example and his teaching, they too can become Enlightened. The doors to the immortal are now open. Anybody who is prepared to make the effort may enter, anyone who is prepared to release their faith.

In the original Pali, the phrase ‘release their faith’ is rather ambiguous. It can mean giving up--releasing wrong faith, and it can also mean releasing--in the sense of developing--right faith.

Faith, saddha (Sanskrit shraddha), is of great importance in the Buddhist spiritual tradition. This kind of faith is not blind belief; in the Buddhist context, faith is the authentic, living, response of the whole being--especially the emotional part of our being--to something which we intuitively perceive to be greater, nobler, more sublime and more worthwhile than ourselves as we are now, something to which we feel we ought to dedicate ourselves, surrender ourselves, something for the sake of which we ought to live. Without faith in this sense there is no spiritual life, no development. Unfortunately, this kind of faith is rather lacking nowadays. There is plenty of faith in inferior values, but faith--in the sense of confidence in something higher than ourselves--is comparatively rare.

Finally, the Buddha speaks to human beings. He decides to teach. But who is he to teach? Who will be first? Who will learn the doctrine most quickly?

At first the Buddha thought of his first teacher, Alara the Kalama, a very good and noble man--but one who had not been able to lead him to the highest truth because he had not himself realized it. We are told, however, that a god appeared to tell the Buddha that Alara the Kalama had died, just a week beforehand. So the Buddha then thought of his second teacher, Udaka Ramaputta, under whom he had also learned many useful things. He then became aware that Udaka Ramaputta too had died, only the previous evening. Finally, he thought of the five ascetics, his five disciple-companions from the days when he had practised self-mortification. They had stayed with him and looked after him when he was practising those terrible austerities in the hope that they would be able to benefit from his eventual realization. When the Buddha

had realized that self-mortification was not the way, and had started taking solid food, they had left him in disgust. But now he thought of them: 'Let me teach the Dhamma first of all to these five.'

At that time they were living just a few miles out of Benares, in the Deer Park at Isipatana. So the Buddha left Buddhagaya (which was then known as Uruvela), and set off to walk the hundred miles to Benares.

He had not been on the road for very long when he met an ascetic belonging to a sect known as the Ajivakas. His name was Upaka. When from a distance Upaka saw the Buddha coming, he was very impressed by his appearance. The Buddha had gained Enlightenment only seven weeks beforehand. He was bright, shining, cheerful and happy. As they drew near, they stopped and greeted each other. As is the custom in India, even to this day, Upaka asked two questions: 'Who is your teacher?' and 'Which doctrine do you profess?'

Upaka got rather more than he bargained for, for the Buddha replied in four resounding verses--his first utterance to humanity:

'Victorious over all, Omniscient am I
Among all things undefiled,
Leaving all, through death of craving freed,
By knowing myself, whom should I point to?
'For me there is no teacher,
One like me does not exist,
In the world with its devas
No one equals me.
For I am perfected in the world,
A teacher supreme am I,
I alone am all-awakened,
Become cool am I, Nibbana-attained.
To turn the dhamma-wheel
I go to Kasi's city,
Beating the drum of deathlessness

In a world that's blind become.' <Majjhima Nikaya I (Middle Length Sayings), Ariyapariyesana Sutta, trans. I.B. Horner, Pali Text Society, London, 1967, p. 214-5>

What we cannot fail to notice here, once we've recovered from the shock, is the Buddha's complete self-confidence--a self-confidence that was to last for the rest of his life. There is no false humility, and no false pride either. He makes a simple statement of fact because he knows exactly what has happened, who he is, and what he is going to do. He knows that he has gained Enlightenment; he knows that he is free; he knows that he is a New Man--in that there is as yet no one else like him anywhere in the world; and he knows that he is going to teach.

As if to check that he has heard correctly, Upaka points out that he seems to be claiming to be a Jina, a conqueror, a Buddha. The Buddha confirms this in another resounding verse:

'Like me, they are victors indeed

Who have won destruction of the cankers [asavas];

Vanquished by me are evil things,

Therefore am I, Upaka, a victor.' <Majjhima Nikaya I (Middle Length Sayings), Ariyapariyesana Sutta, trans. I.B. Horner, Pali Text Society, London, 1967, p. 215>

Upaka thinks for a moment, and simply says 'Maybe'. Shaking his head, he goes off, we are told, by a by-path.

This incident is very significant. We ourselves are rather like Upaka. We too are confronted, as it were, by the figure of the Buddha, and by his teaching. We too take a look at the Buddha, and listen to the Dhamma for a while. Then, just like Upaka, we say, 'Maybe there is something in it.' But then we shake our heads and go off on some little by-path of our own. In this way we miss a great opportunity, perhaps forever.

The Buddha then proceeded to Benares, to the Deer Park at Isipatana, arriving on a full moon day. This was a beautiful coincidence. He had been walking for a week, and now, on the full moon day exactly two lunar months after his Enlightenment, he arrived at the Deer Park at Isipatana. The five ascetics were there; apparently they had been living there for some time. When they saw the Buddha coming they started to speak among themselves: 'Look, there is that fellow Gautama, the one who gave up, the one who started living luxuriously and taking solid food. He has had the nerve to come back! All right, let him come! If he wants, he even can sit with us for a while, but let's not show him any respect at all.'

As the Buddha came nearer, the five ascetics tried to take no notice. But when he drew close they simply could not help themselves. They rose like humble pupils and moved forward. One politely took his bowl while another took the spare robe he was carrying; another prepared a seat while another brought some water for the Buddha to wash his feet. However, even though they could not help showing respect, they still addressed him by his personal name, Gautama, and addressed him also as avuso, which is a familiar mode of address among monks, meaning 'friend'. In response, the Buddha simply said, 'Do not address me in this way, this is not proper, not appropriate. I am no longer just your friend. I have gained Enlightenment. I teach the Dhamma. If you practise according to my teaching you too will gain Enlightenment.'

The five ascetics did not believe him. They could not take him seriously. 'Look here,' they said, 'For all those years you practised self-mortification. You went beyond what anybody else has done in this life. But you did not gain Enlightenment. Now you've gone back to a comfortable, easy, way of living. How do you think you can gain Enlightenment by that means?'

Again the Buddha insisted: 'No. I am the Enlightened One. If you follow my teaching you too will become Enlightened.'

They still could not accept what the Buddha was saying. Three times the Buddha therefore made his declaration, and three times they refused to accept his claim. Then he said: 'Look, in all the time that you knew me before, did I ever speak in this way? Have I ever been so certain, so emphatic? Have I ever claimed before that I have gained Enlightenment?' They conceded that he had not. 'All right. Now let me teach you.' In this way he began to convince them, and they became at least open-minded about what he was saying.

The sutta describes what happened next very beautifully. Apparently, the Buddha started teaching the ascetics in turns. While two of them remained listening to the Buddha in the Deer Park, the other three would go out for alms, collecting food from house to house. What the three of them collected, all six would eat. Then the Buddha would teach those three, while the two others went out for alms. So far as we can tell, the six of them lived in this way throughout the rainy season, for twelve or more weeks, taking it in turns to collect food and to receive instruction from the Buddha. At the end of that period, we are told, all five gained Enlightenment. They too became 'New Men'. There were now six New Men in the world.

There is a very important point to be noted here. So far I have been following the oldest account--from the Majjhima Nikaya. While this account tells us the way in which the Buddha taught the five ascetics, and tells us that the five ascetics became Enlightened, the sutta does not actually tell us what the Buddha taught them. We simply do not know what teaching he gave. That remains a mystery.

Later accounts, even in the Pali Canon, try to fill in the blank, especially with a text known as the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta--the sutta, or discourse, on the 'setting in motion of the Wheel of the Doctrine'. This is a useful--if rather stereotyped--summary of the Buddha's teaching which deals with the doctrines of the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path. It is quite possible that it represents the substance of a talk actually given by the Buddha on some occasion. But it is important to remember that the earliest account of the 'conversion' of those five ascetics makes no mention of any particular teaching at all.

Although some will find this lack of detailed information very unsatisfactory, I personally find it very suggestive. It changes the nature of the whole episode. The Buddha taught the five ascetics; but he teaches anyone. He taught then, but he teaches now. This means that the teaching cannot ever be reduced to a specific formula or set of doctrines. You can never say that you have all of the Buddha's teaching under your thumb, all written down: 'If I learn this and study that, I will have Buddhism, have the Buddha's teaching.' The teaching is not any specific doctrine. The teaching, as the Buddha himself was to say on another occasion, is whatever conduces to Enlightenment, whatever helps you to grow, whatever helps you to develop.

This is brought out very clearly in a later, Mahayana sutra, the Diamond Sutra. Here, the monk Subhuti, speaking under the Buddha's inspiration, says:

'The Tathagata [the Buddha] has no formulated teaching to enunciate. Wherefore? Because the Tathagata has said that Truth is uncontainable and inexpressible. It neither is nor is it not.--

Thus it is that this unformulated Principle is the foundation of the different systems of all the sages.' <Diamond Sutra trans. A.F. Price, Buddhist Society, London 1947, p.32>

This is only a step away from saying that the Buddha does not actually speak at all, that the New Man remains silent. Another great Mahayana sutra, the Lankavatara Sutra, actually takes this step. The Buddha says here,

'From the night of the Enlightenment to the night of the Tathagata's Parinirvana [passing away], he has not uttered, nor ever will he utter, one word.' <D. Goddard (ed.), A Buddhist Bible, Beacon Press, Boston, 1970, p.348>

In other words, the Buddha has not said anything which can be identified as the teaching.

For this reason we can never pin the Buddha's teaching down to any simple formula, to the 'three of this' or the 'four of that', or to any such set of principles. Really, the teaching is nothing verbal, nothing conceptual, at all. The teaching is a realization and an influence. It is a communication between the Enlightened and the unenlightened. Certainly, it sometimes makes use of words, doctrines, and so on, but it can never be reduced to them.

All this rather alters our picture of what happened in the Deer Park at Isipatana. We may tend to imagine the Buddha arriving at the Deer Park, taking out his notes, and giving a lecture to the five ascetics--at the end of which they become Enlightened--then going off to give his lecture somewhere else. Traditional Buddhist art reinforces this view. In traditional works the Buddha is usually depicted sitting cross-legged on a magnificent, ornately decorated, throne, the five ascetics kneeling submissively at his feet while he preaches. But, as we have seen, the Buddha had great difficulty in getting the five ascetics even to listen to him. He certainly did not deliver a formal address, much less still a lecture. He thrashed things out with them, in personal discussion, over a period of weeks and months.

So on the occasion of Dhamma Day we do not celebrate the Dhamma in the sense of any particular rigid formulation of the Truth, any particular text or scripture--however useful, however ancient, or however inspiring. What we celebrate is the first impact of the Enlightened Man on the unenlightened, the first impact of the New Man on the old men. This impact finds expression in terms of speech, but it is not confined to speech. Today we are celebrating the impact of the New Man on the 'old men' and 'old women' of the present generation: upon ourselves.

Life today is a complicated and sometimes difficult business. It is full of distractions, as though there are lots of clutching fingers trying to get at us, trying to take hold of us, all the time. Under such conditions it is only too easy to forget what is really the main purpose of human existence. It is only too easy to ignore, or forget, the possibility of developing oneself, of growing in the direction of Enlightenment. Occasions such as this festival help us to remember.

There are many ways in which we can grow and develop. We can grow with the help of meditation, with the help of philosophizing--as an activity of the mind; we can grow with the help of the practice of the arts, and so on. As this process unfolds we will sooner or later find ourselves in contact with others who are also growing, also developing. As we weave a network of relationships with these people, coming subtly more and more in contact with one another, we shall one day wake up to the fact that we collectively form a spiritual community, united by common ideals and a common way of life. If, as a result of the impact of the New Man on our lives, we ourselves start becoming 'new men' and 'new women', evolving together and forming a new spiritual community, then the New Man will not have spoken in vain.