

## **Tape 115 The Meaning of Parinirvana**

In the course of the last few weeks or even in the course of the last few months, I've had occasion to participate in discussions not only with people here, not only with people who are actually trying to follow the Path as taught by the Buddha, but discussions with other people elsewhere, people who, though they were involved in their own way in the living of the spiritual life, the treading of the spiritual path, were not very familiar with Buddhism, even though in many cases very interested in it. And in the course of the discussions which I have had, which in fact I'm still having, with some of these people in some of these groups, both formal and informal, one question which has come up again and again - one question, in fact, which has been put to me again and again - is the question of what really makes one a Buddhist.

Now obviously one is not thinking in formal, official, as it were ecclesiastical, terms - one is not thinking in terms of official membership or anything like that - but one is thinking in essentially spiritual terms, thinking in terms of Reality, thinking in terms of individual commitment. And the answer which has always emerged to that sort of question is that a Buddhist ultimately, when the question is probed, when the question is plumbed, one may say, to its very depths, a Buddhist is one who Goes for Refuge.

Now Going for Refuge is an act. One can even say it is the Buddhist act, the distinctive and the decisive Buddhist act. And one therefore is a Buddhist not merely by virtue of some external membership in some external body, not even by virtue of one's belief or one's faith, but essentially in virtue of an action, an action of going, an action of Going for Refuge. Going for Refuge to what? This is something also that has to be elucidated, and in traditional terms one Goes for Refuge to the Buddha, to the Dharma, and to the Sangha.

By Buddha one means one's own ultimate ideal of spiritual perfection, or in a few words the spiritual Ideal. Going for Refuge to the Buddha means the acceptance for oneself of a certain spiritual ideal, especially as embodied in the life and the teaching of the Buddha; an ideal which one takes, which one accepts, as one's own in the sense that it is this ideal that one wishes to realise oneself, to achieve oneself, and embody in one's own life; in other words, it's a practical ideal, not merely something theoretical. So this is Going for Refuge to the Buddha.

Then Going for Refuge to the Dharma: this means, or this suggests, that in order to realise this ideal of Buddhahood, this supreme spiritual ideal, there must be some way, there must be some method, there must be some regular course of progress, and this essentially is what we call the Dharma - the Path of the Higher Evolution, in more contemporary terms. And therefore Going for Refuge to the Dharma means committing oneself to follow this path, however far it may lead, however difficult it may be, however remote the regions may be into which it leads, however trackless as it were, however intangible, but one commits oneself to following that Path of the Higher Evolution, that path leading to the realisation of the spiritual ideal, leading to the realisation of Buddhahood, one commits oneself to following it to the end. I had almost said 'the bitter end', but of course the end in this case isn't at all bitter. One might say the end is very sweet; but the path itself at least, in stages, may be bitter, may be rugged. So this is Going for Refuge to the Dharma.

Thirdly, Going for Refuge to the Sangha. The Sangha is the spiritual community: other people who in their own way are also treading that same spiritual path that you are treading, or trying to tread, in the direction of the realisation of the same spiritual ideal. So these are your fellow

pilgrims, these are your companions on the way. You help them, they help you. You inspire them, they inspire you. If they stumble, you try to pick them up; if you stumble, you hope that they'll try to assist you to your feet also. So this is the spiritual community, this is the Sangha, and to the Sangha also one Goes for Refuge.

So in brief, in a very few words, in these traditional terms, one is a Buddhist by virtue of the fact that one Goes for Refuge in this sense, to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. And these three, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, are known therefore as the Three Refuges and also as the Three Jewels, and they are the three great themes, one might say, of Buddhism itself. The whole of Buddhism, vast as it is, complex as it is and also simple as it is, can be reduced to these three: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

And inasmuch as the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha are so important, are so all-important, it's only natural that in the course of centuries the custom should have grown up in the Buddhist East of commemorating them, celebrating them, at certain stated times of the year, on certain stated occasions. So we find in the Buddhist calendar we have three great days, three great feasts, if you like, three great festivals, when we commemorate the Buddha, when we commemorate the Dharma, when we commemorate the Sangha. Buddha Day is, of course, Vaishakha Purnima, the full moon day of the month April-May, when we commemorate the Enlightenment of the Buddha, when we commemorate, when we remember, that which makes the Buddha Buddha; in other words, his Enlightenment. And then Dharma Day or Dharmachakra Day is that day, some two months later, corresponding to our June-July, when we remember the Buddha's first enunciation of the Truth, the first teaching that he gave after his Enlightenment, the first showing of the Way, the first showing of the Path of the Higher Evolution, to the rest of humanity. And then Sangha Day comes later on still in the year; this comes on another full moon day, that of the month October-November. So on these three great days in the course of the Buddhist year we celebrate and we commemorate and remember these three Refuges, these Three Jewels, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

In addition to these, there are many other festivals, many other celebrations, but two amongst them all are of outstanding importance. The first of these is the Buddha's birthday; the other is the Buddha's Parinirvana Day or, as we would say in the case of any person other than the Buddha, the anniversary of his death. The Buddha's birthday falls, according to the Far Eastern Buddhist calendar, on April 8th. We'll be in retreat at Haslemere this year on that day, and we shall be having something quite special on that occasion. And the second day, the anniversary of the Parinirvana, happens to fall today, according to the Far Eastern Buddhist calendar. Today is the anniversary of the Buddha's passing away.

So today we can say we are commemorating what, as I've said, in the case of other people we would describe as the death of the Buddha. Now it so happens that this day falls on a Tuesday, and on Tuesdays, as most of you know, we have a meditation; sometimes more than one meditation. So inasmuch as we are commemorating the Parinirvana of the Buddha, the death as it were of the Buddha, and inasmuch as Tuesday is usually for us a meditation day, I'm going to say something this evening on the subject of the recollection of death in general, and the recollection of the Buddha's 'death' in particular.

The recollection of death, or imarana anusatii, happens to be a particular kind of meditation practice or meditation discipline. I want, therefore, to begin by saying this evening something in general on the subject of meditation.

We find nowadays that a lot of people talk about meditation; a lot of people practise meditation, compared with the numbers practising it before; a lot of people even teach meditation. A lot of people talk about meditation. So the word is quite well known, the word is quite current, as it were; you can even see it on posters in the Underground. But what meditation essentially is, what meditation comprehends, what sort of ground meditation covers, how it is to be practised, what its significance is, how many different kinds of meditation practice there are - all these points are not so well understood.

Very broadly speaking, we can say that there are three main senses in which the word meditation can be used, and they correspond, we may say, to three successively higher levels of experience or, if you like, successively higher levels of consciousness. First of all there's meditation in the sense of the integration, the bringing together, of all our psychic energies. This is the first level, if you like the first step. Human beings, like other living things, are embodiments of energy. That is what we essentially are. Maybe we don't look like it sometimes, but this is what we essentially are - embodiments of energy; if you like, crystallised, semi-crystallised, energy. But unfortunately our energy is as it were split up into all sorts of streams: streams of energy flowing some in this direction, some in that direction, some meandering happily, others rushing and pouring and tumbling. And sometimes these different streams of energy, instead of flowing together, instead of flowing harmoniously, flow as it were in opposition. They are locked, as it were, in a sort of conflict. They sort of cancel each other - cancel one another, even - out, and when that happens we tend to stagnate, we are fighting with ourselves, our energies are split, we are divided, we are divided people, divided selves if you like. And this is a situation in which many people find themselves today: their energies are scattered, they are distracted, they can't do very much, they can't achieve very much because their energies are divided against themselves, because they are divided against their own self.

So the first thing that we have to do is to bring all these energies together, to collect all these scattered energies, to get them flowing as it were in the same channel, and have that channel as it were cutting deeper and deeper and deeper all the time, and the energies flowing more and more smoothly, more and more steadily along that one channel, in the direction of their true, their ultimate goal. So this is what meditation is in the first place, meditation in the sense of the integration of the sum total of one's psychical, even of one's psycho-physical, energies so that they flow smoothly and harmoniously, so that there's no conflict, no discord, so that one experiences peace, one experiences harmony, one experiences a great sense of integration, of everything coming together; not everything being ripped apart, as it were.

Then there is meditation in a still higher sense, meditation in the sense of the experience of what we can describe as superconscious states. These are the states which are collectively termed in the Indian tradition *idhyanasi*, and they are states of progressive superconscious simplification, in the sense that, according to tradition, confirmed by people's experience in the earlier, in the lower *idhyanasi*, there are quite a number of different mental or psychical factors, as they are called, but as the experience develops, as one passes from a lower to a higher *idhyanai*, the number of mental, the number of psychical, factors is gradually reduced.

In the first *idhyanai*, for instance, out of the four, one experiences not only integration, which one carries over from meditation in the previous sense, but one experiences bliss, one experiences joy, one experiences subtle mental activity of various kinds. But, as one ascends, the mental activity gradually fades away. One does not think of anything. One does not think about anything. All mental functioning in this sense has entirely ceased. The mind is stilled,

but at the same time one is perfectly aware, perfectly conscious, in fact more aware and more conscious than ever, only there is no mental activity. The whole mind becomes like a vast pool, a vast lake, in which every ripple has died away. The water has not died away; the water is still there, but instead of being rippled, instead of being tossed into waves, it's perfectly calm, perfectly level, perfectly shining and perfectly serene. So this is what the experience is like in the second idhyana when there is no mental activity.

And as one ascends, as one goes even higher, even the experience of joy, which is comparatively coarse, fades away, and what one has left is the integrated psychical contents, a feeling of intense bliss and intense peace; and still, of course, no mental activity. And going even further, even higher, eventually there is not even a feeling of bliss; even that is too coarse, even that is not refined enough for this level or at this level. At this fourth level, all that one experiences, all that one knows, is just a sort of vast ocean as it were of integration, if you like, of mental harmony, with an overwhelming experience of absolute peace, which far surpasses any experience of happiness or even bliss.

So in this way the idhyanas develop; in this way, in the case of these superconscious states, one goes from lower to higher and ever higher states and experiences. And on the way all sorts of things happen. One may have other experiences, too. What I've described represents a sort of standard pattern, but there are all sorts of additional dimensions, all sorts of byways and bypaths of experience, according to different people's temperaments and backgrounds and so on. Some people have all sorts of visionary experiences. They see great archetypal images; they may see in the course of their meditation the floating forms of landscapes. They may see jewel-like objects, mandalas; they may even see Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, gods, goddesses and so on, all emerging as it were from the depths of their own minds. All of these are experiences which may come to one person or another in the course of their meditation practice at this level, as they are passing one by one through these idhyanas. And also they may start developing various subtle supernormal faculties. They may start finding themselves becoming extraordinarily telepathic, aware of what is happening in other people's minds, or at least much, much more sensitive to other people's emotional reactions and so on. They may even occasionally find themselves hearing and seeing things at a distance or they may even have the odd flash of what seems to be a recollection of a previous life, a previous existence. But one is advised, when these sort of things happen, just to leave them aside; not to become fascinated, not to pursue them, but just to press on on that path, to try to go from the lower to the higher idhyana, and in this way extend and deepen one's experience of this level of meditation. So this is meditation in the second sense, meditation in the sense of experience of superconscious states.

Thirdly, there is meditation in the sense of Insight into the true nature of existence. What does this mean? It means that as you ascend, as you go from lower to higher idhyana states, as you go from lower to higher levels of consciousness, the experience not only becomes more integrated, it not only becomes more blissful, it not only becomes more peaceful - also, of course, as I mentioned, there's a cessation, quite early on, of mental processes - but also what happens is that one's experience becomes more and more objective. You become less and less under the influence of your own subjectivity, less and less under the influence of the pleasure principle, one might say. Everything becomes less and less distorted by subjective factors, and you begin as it were to get above all those things, just like an aeroplane emerging from the clouds into the clear sky, into the stratosphere, where there are no clouds and there's just the blue sky, and you begin as it were to look down on everything below, down on the earth, down on everything conditioned, and see it just as it is, because you're clear of it, away from it, free of it,

and you can see it for the first time, perhaps, or at least begin to see it, much more objectively. You begin to see things as they really are. You begin to see Reality. In other words, you develop the beginnings at least of what is called Insight or Wisdom, which leads directly to Enlightenment, directly to Nirvana.

These are the three main senses in which one uses this word meditation, so you can see that the word meditation covers a very great deal of ground. It operates on these three vastly different levels. In the first place, there's meditation as concentration: in other words, the integration of all the psychical contents. There's meditation as, we may say, meditation; let's keep that word for this stage - experience of these states of higher consciousness. And then meditation as contemplation, developing Insight, developing Wisdom, on the basis of one's experience of the superconscious states. So meditation in the sense of concentration, meditation in the sense of meditation, meditation in the sense of contemplation. This is the scheme, if you like, that, very broadly and roughly, we establish.

Most people in the course of their meditation practice are concerned for a very long time with meditation in the first and second senses, meditation as concentration and meditation as meditation. It will be usually a long time before they are ready to come to meditation in the sense of contemplation. Most people are concerned simply, to begin with, with the integration of all their scattered energies. They want to pull themselves together, they want to be one person, not a number of conflicting selves. They want to have all their energies flowing together harmoniously, they don't want to waste their energy in conflicts internal and external. They want to be whole, they want to be harmonious, and that's the only way in which they can really deploy their energies properly and be really happy.

After that, when that has been achieved, they are concerned with trying to raise, trying to lift, their consciousness somewhat above the usual, somewhat above the so-called normal level. In other words, what most people who take up the practice of meditation are concerned with, to the extent that they actually do practise and experience, is to transform a lower into a higher state of consciousness. This is what essentially we are concerned with when we take up meditation or when we try to meditate. Man is essentially consciousness. We are what our state of consciousness is. Our state of consciousness is us, our overall state of consciousness. It's what we are essentially. So in the course of our spiritual life in general, and in the course of our meditation practice in particular, we are concerned with changing our state of consciousness, which isn't an easy thing to do; changing it from a lower to a higher state.

This is not only not very easy for the vast majority of people, for those who are not spiritually gifted from the very beginning; this is very, very difficult indeed. There are all sorts of hindrances, there are all sorts of obstacles. We know there are plenty of obstacles outside, but there are even more obstacles, we may say, inside, obstacles in our own minds, obstacles in our own present state of conditioned consciousness. And the old Buddhist tradition summarises these obstacles, these hindrances which hold us down in a lower state of consciousness and prevent us rising to a higher state of consciousness, under the general heading of what are known as the five defilements, which are also sometimes known as the five poisons, because they poison the whole of our existence, and if we're not careful bring us even to spiritual death.

What are these five? First of all, distraction; secondly, aversion; thirdly, craving; fourthly, ignorance; and fifthly, conceit. Now for overcoming these five defilements or poisons, there are five different types of practice, and these are what we call the five basic methods of

meditation. In other words, for overcoming each poison, each defilement within our own lower consciousness, there is a specific method of meditation, and we are advised to use these methods according to our own temperament. In other words, if one particular poison or defilement predominates, we concentrate on the corresponding method of meditation which remedies that, and if we find for instance our experience changes, if we find, say, that one particular defilement is predominant one week and another defilement predominant the next week or the next month, we can change our method of practice accordingly. So let me go briefly through these five methods of meditation, these five basic methods, and give you some idea of how these five defilements or five poisons are counteracted and overcome.

First of all there's the defilement or the poison of distraction. What does this mean? Distraction is inability to concentrate. You're in a state where your mind is very easily taken away. You're doing something, or you're supposed to be doing something, but you can't concentrate on it, you keep thinking of something else, or you keep losing your attention, your mind is carried away. Someone comes to see you, you forget all about what you were supposed to be doing, or you hear a sound or you see something and at once your mind is carried away by that; and some people unfortunately, especially under the conditions of modern life, find it practically impossible just to settle down and concentrate on one thing at a time, whatever they are supposed to be doing. They are being perpetually as it were bombarded by stimuli, perpetually bombarded by various things which drag their attention away - and sometimes it doesn't even have to be dragged, it's very easily taken away. So this is distraction, this inability to concentrate. It's also very much tied up with what I was talking about before, this question of non-integration. Your energies are not integrated, they're not all pulling in the same direction or working in the same direction, in the same way; so one stream of energy, for instance, one self, as it were, wants to concentrate on something, so it does it for a little while, then another self pops up with its own stream of energy, wants to concentrate on something else or at least doesn't want to concentrate on that particular thing, so it tries to take over. There's conflict, and in the end the first self succumbs, the other self takes over, and in terms of the first self and its interests mind has wandered, you become distracted. And this is going on all the time.

So what is the remedy for this? How can we overcome our distractedness? How can we collect ourselves, bring ourselves together, bring our energies together? Which is the method for this? The method - as most of you know, I'm sure, already - is the method of the mindfulness of breathing. Mindfulness of breathing is especially intended to correct and overcome this defilement, this poison, of mental distraction and lack of collectedness. And most of you know how we practise it. We practise it in various stages. We settle ourselves comfortably down and we just allow the attention, the concentration, to focus on the breath. We are just aware of ourselves breathing in and breathing out in a quite natural manner, and we start counting; and as most of you know, in the first stage of practice we count at the end of each in-and-out breath, in the second stage we count at the beginning of each in-and-out breath. Then in the third stage we drop the counting; mind should have become pretty concentrated by this time, and we just allow ourselves to become absorbed in the flow of the breath as it flows in and flows out or appears to expand and contract, rise and fall; become absorbed in this sort of movement, in a very rhythmical way. Finally experience getting deeper and deeper and deeper. And in the fourth stage we settle down and concentrate just on that tiny as it were tickling sensation that we experience within the nostrils. And in the end, even that may go, and we'll be as it were suspended, if you like, in mid-air as it were, with nothing to concentrate on. We are concentrated but we are not concentrating on anything. We are just harmonious. We are just like a sphere which is resting on one non-dimensional point. It's perfectly at rest and perfectly

mobile at the same time. This is our state at the end of this practice of the Mindfulness of breathing. So this particular practice, the Mindfulness of Breathing, which the majority of you know very well, having practised it for some time, is the remedy in particular for distraction, wandering of the mind, and this is one reason why we usually start off with this practice in our classes; because unless you can concentrate to some extent, unless you can bring at least some of your scattered energies together, you can't make any progress with any method of meditation. This comes at the beginning. First of all, therefore, the mindfulness of breathing, helping you to overcome distraction, and paving the way for the practice of other methods.

Now we've overcome this first defilement; now for the second one. This is the defilement of aversion or, if you like, hate. It's overcome by practising the method of what is called imaitri bhavanai, usually translated as the development of universal loving-kindness; the development of an attitude towards all living beings, the development of an attitude of positive emotion - a feeling of love, compassion, sympathy and so on. This practice, too, as again most of you know, proceeds through a number of stages. First of all you develop love and good will towards your own self; you feel it, you experience it quite powerfully. Then you extend that to a near and dear friend, then to some neutral person, then even to an enemy, and then you start directing it towards all living beings in ever-widening circles: all the people in the room with you, all the people in the town, the city, the country, all the continents, eventually the whole world; and eventually the feeling goes out towards all living beings whatsoever, in all the directions of space. And this is not a thought, it's an actual feeling. You actually feel well towards all these other living beings; your heart, your whole being, even, eventually, is filled with a warm, positive glow of love and friendliness and good will and benevolence towards all other forms of life. So this is the development of imaitrii, friendliness, which is the method for overcoming aversion.

Thirdly, the defilement, the poison, of craving. This is intense, powerful, if you like neurotic, desire, craving, lust to possess this, that and the other. And this is very powerful, very primordial, one might say, and very difficult to overcome. Here there are three kinds of method given; whereas in the case of the other defilements there's usually only one, here there are three.

First of all, the recollection of impurity. This is a rather drastic method that very few people have recourse to nowadays. It's usually supposed to be practised only by monks and hermits and suchlike people. It consists in going to a burning ground and sitting down in the proximity of corpses in different stages of decay; and this is still practised by some people in the East. But, obviously, you have to have very strong nerves and a very strong spiritual resolution to be able to practise in this way.

Then there's the recollection of death, which is the same sort of thing only milder; and, thirdly, recollection of impermanence, which is still more general and therefore milder still. Now we are particularly concerned this evening with the second of these, the second of these three methods of overcoming craving, that is to say we are concerned with the recollection of death.

Let's go into this in a little more detail. According to the traditional practice, before one actually starts practising the recollection of death, you must practise mindfulness, you must develop mindfulness - preferably, if necessary, with the help of the method of the mindfulness of breathing. In other words, when you take up the practice of the recollection of death, your mind must already be in a very integrated, peaceful, harmonious and happy state, and relatively free

from discursive thought and cogitation and reflection and so on. Now this is very important, for a definite reason. If you take up the practice of the recollection of death without having experienced mindfulness beforehand, the likelihood is that in your practice of the recollection of death you will go astray, and you will practise unwisely - maybe even with harmful results.

For instance, if you take up the recollection of death straight away without having achieved a very definite mindfulness first, you may start thinking of people near and dear to you who have died; and since your state is one of unmindfulness, you may start feeling sad, and this would certainly get in the way of your meditation practice, it would pull you down. You'd start getting depressed. Or again, if you took up the practice of the recollection of death without having established mindfulness first, if you happened to think of someone whom you disliked who had died, you might even feel rather pleased, you might feel rather happy - 'Well, thank god he's gone' - you see? So this would be very undesirable, this would be an unskilful thought, a negative emotion on your part - feeling glad that so-and-so had died - and that would also pull you down.

Or again, if you took up the practice of the recollection of death without experiencing true mindfulness first, and if you either thought of or even actually saw people who were dead, you saw people even suffering death, undergoing death, and you didn't feel any particular reaction, you just felt completely indifferent about it in a purely mundane sense, that also would be bad; this would be a negative indifference, an indifference of not-caring. You wouldn't feel compassion, you wouldn't feel objective sorrow for them, and this would be bad.

So therefore one is advised very strongly that before one takes up the recollection of death, you must be firmly established in mindfulness; otherwise you may experience feelings of depression or you may experience feelings of - in English we haven't got a word for it, but the Germans have got a word - a sort of sadistic joy. Or you may just feel a very negative indifference. So one should experience awareness, mindfulness, even if possible a higher state of consciousness first, and then take up the practice of the recollection of death.

So, having done that, having established one's awareness and mindfulness, and being in this state of higher, serene consciousness, and able to start thinking about death without any morbid feelings or any feeling of depression, without any feeling of being rather glad that other people are out of the way and so on, what does one do? In this serene, happy frame of mind, you start reflecting that death is inevitable. This may seem rather a truism, but it's the sort of thing that people acknowledge when they hear it but which they never actually realise. You say to yourself that death will come. It's as simple as that. You recollect death in this way; in this happy, serene frame of mind you say to yourself, 'I'm going to die. Death is inevitable.' And you really try to see that fact.

Now one might say that, broadly speaking, other factors as it were being equal, the younger you are the more difficult this is. When you are very young it is practically impossible. You don't really feel that you're going to die. You've got this irrational feeling as though you're going to go on living for ever and ever and ever, that's your real feeling. You can't really think, you can't really feel, you can't really experience, that one day you are going to die. You might even see people dying all around you, but it may not occur to you really to apply this to your own self. You can't grasp it, you can't imagine it, it seems so absolutely remote, absurd, ridiculous, that you are going to die. But it's a fact, and the older one gets the more one begins to see this, and



the more clearly one sees this; and you begin to see, you begin to realise, that so far you've never seen at all, you hadn't really understood this, this simple fact that you were going to die.

So at the beginning of this practice this is all that you do. In this serene, happy, concentrated frame of mind you just say to yourself: 'I'm going to die.' Or, the tradition says, you can simply say to yourself, 'Death. Death.' And you can go on saying this like a sort of mantra at intervals: 'Death. Death' - and just letting the thought of death sink in, and especially the thought that you are going to die. The traditional practice says it's helpful, under these circumstances, at this stage in your practice, if you can actually see dead bodies. But notice - if you are in, if you've already achieved, this state of mindfulness and awareness, as you should have done before your practice began. It's no use trying to take a look at dead bodies, at corpses, if your mind is unconcentrated, is not very calm, is liable to depression, and so on. You've got to have not only steady nerves in the ordinary sense but real inner calm, otherwise if you take up this sort of practice and start looking around for corpses you can do yourself more harm than good.

Or if you don't want to go so far as actually to take a look at a corpse - which many people, of course, in this country have never seen in the course of their whole lifetime, unlike in the East, where you can see a corpse almost any day of the week if you want to, as they are passing by being carried to the burning ground every day down the main road, not discreetly hidden away in a coffin as we have them in this country - what you can do if you don't want to go to the extent of actually seeing a corpse is - and this is what is very often done in Buddhist countries - you can keep a skull by you. You might have wondered sometimes why Tibetans have skull cups and things like that, why they even wear ornaments of human bone and have thighbone trumpets. It's partly with the idea of familiarising themselves with the idea of death, of handling things which have got to do with death, and overcoming their natural fear of death. So if you don't want to go the whole hog, as it were, if you don't want actually to go and look at a corpse, then you can either keep a skull cup by you or just a fragment of a skull - even that will do. Some people in the Buddhist East have a rosary made, even, of human bone. You can't get nice round beads, I'm afraid, but they have sort of discs of human bone and they use them in the same way; and it's all to bring home to themselves the fact of death. And once again I must repeat there is nothing morbid about it. You have to be quite sure to begin with that you are already in a state of calmness and concentration and peacefulness within yourself, before you begin this sort of practice. In other words, mindfulness, serenity of mind, is the indispensable basis of this kind of practice, the recollection of death.

Tradition goes on to say that if the simple methods I have so far described don't seem to be very successful, if they're not enough, if they don't seem to be producing results, there are other reflections in which one can engage to assist one's recollection of death. For instance, you can start thinking systematically of the precariousness of human life, in fact of life in general - the precariousness of it; can reflect that it's hanging all the time by a thread. Your life, the continuance of your life, depends on all sorts of factors.

You need air; if you stopped breathing for a minute or more, you'd just die. You're totally dependent on breath; you're totally dependent on that pair of bellows inside your chest called your lungs. If they stopped pumping air - finish. If all the air were sucked out of this room - finish; we'd all be gone. In the same way we are dependent upon warmth, dependent upon temperature. If the temperature goes up a little bit, we can't carry on living. If it goes down a little bit, we can't carry on living. If the earth was to wander just a little bit, just a few miles, out of its orbit, we couldn't carry on living. And in the same way if we didn't get food for a few days

or a few weeks, or a few months at the most, we couldn't carry on living. Life is dependent on all these factors. It's so precarious it's a marvel that anyone is alive at all. Life is continually treading this tightrope over an abyss, it's continually just walking along the edge of a precipice. It's so difficult to be alive, yet we are alive, we've achieved it somehow; but all the time that life is just hanging by a thread.

Then we can reflect, again, that there are as it were no special conditions for death. This is very interesting, we don't usually realise this. There are no special set of conditions for death. It's not as though you die at night but you don't die during the day, so that during the day at least you're safe, you know you're not going to die; it isn't like that. You can die either during the night or during the day. You can either die when you are young or when you are old. It isn't that if you are young, you can think, 'I'm young, so therefore I'm not going to die. I'll only die when I'm old.' No, you can die either when you're young or when you're old. You can die when you're sick or when you're healthy. You can die in your home or outside, or you can die in your own country or in a foreign land. In other words, there's no set of conditions which, if you come within those conditions, you can be sure that you are not going to die. You can't be sure. Death doesn't abide by any conditions. There are no special conditions for death. In other words, it's something you can't possibly escape. You can't go anywhere to escape it. You can't be sure at any time that, because of such-and-such conditions, therefore you're not going to die that particular instant. You can never be sure of that. You never know. So this also is another subject for reflection - that death does not have any special conditions. There are no special conditions for death. It can come at any time under any circumstances whatsoever. There's absolutely no foolproof barrier between you and death at any time, in any place. So this also one can reflect upon. It's a rather sobering thought.

Also one can reflect upon the fact that everybody has died. Every single member of the human race, however great, however distinguished, however noble, however famous, they all had to die one day. They might have been a great poet, they might have been a great artist; might have been a great yogi, might have been a great spiritual figure, might have been even the greatest of the disciples of the Buddha, might have been the Buddha himself; but they all had to die. So you are not going to escape. This is another line of reflection, and this, of course, begins to bring us back to the actual occasion that we are commemorating today, that is the death or Parinirvana of the Buddha himself.

But let us go on to our next basic method of meditation, which is in respect of the defilement or the poison of ignorance. The method for overcoming ignorance, the method of meditation, is that of the contemplation of the chain of conditioned co-production or dependent origination. I'm afraid we're here becoming a little bit technical, but I'll try to simplify as much as possible. The chain of conditioned co-production or the chain of dependent origination consists of twelve inidanasi or links, as we may call them, and as some of you, I'm sure, know, it's these twelve links that are depicted in pictorial form in the outermost circle of the Wheel of Life, where you see the twelve little pictures going round in the outermost circle. And these twelve links, these twelve little pictures, represent the whole process, as we may call it, of the reactive mind as it operates throughout this life - not only this life but the past life, the present life and the future life.

There's no time to go into details, but let me just at least enumerate and perhaps describe briefly the twelve links of that chain. First of all there's ignorance. In dependence on ignorance, by which of course is meant spiritual ignorance, arise the isamskarasi or volitions. In dependence

on the volitions there arises consciousness. In dependence on consciousness there arises the whole psycho-physical organism. In dependence on the psycho-physical organism there arise the six organs of sense, one mental, five physical. In dependence on those six organs of sense there arises contact with an external world. In dependence upon that contact with an external world there arise feelings of various kinds - pleasant, painful and neutral. In dependence upon that feeling, especially on pleasant feeling, there arises thirst or craving for the repetition of that pleasant feeling. And in dependence on that thirst for the repetition of the pleasant feeling, there arises grasping - trying to hang on to the pleasant feeling, hang on to the object that creates the pleasant feeling. And then in dependence upon that grasping and clinging, there arises becoming, which is to say the whole process of psychological conditioning, the whole process of the reactive mind itself. And in dependence upon that, there arises birth or rebirth in the sense of a renewal of that whole kind of process of the reactive mind. And then in dependence upon that, further decay and death.

So these are the twelve links in this chain of what is called conditioned co-production, dependent origination, as depicted in these twelve little pictures in the outermost circle of the Tibetan Wheel of Life. So in this practice, one first of all learns them all by heart, if you like in the original Pali and Sanskrit or in English translation, it doesn't really matter; and you say to yourself - obviously you're already in a state of concentration - you say to yourself: 'In dependence on ignorance arise volitions; in dependence on volitions arises consciousness; in dependence on consciousness arises the psycho-physical organism.' And you don't just repeat the words, you don't just understand in an intellectual sense; you try to see what is happening, because it's happening to you, it's happening in you, it's your own reactive mind that you're studying with the help of this formula, with the help of this framework.

So when you say 'Ignorance - ignorance' you as it were see, if you like, a sort of great black darkness; this is ignorance. There's no awareness, there's no light. It's all black and dark; consciousness hasn't arisen, awareness hasn't arisen, it's the darkness of ignorance, of unawareness. And as you reflect on this, you ponder on this, you see as it were emerging out of this darkness, arising in dependence upon this darkness and blindness and ignorance, various strivings, volitions, acts of will - all very dull and dim and blind because they arise out of that darkness and blindness and unawareness. And then you can see very clearly how all sorts of unaware actions, blind actions, thoughtless actions, thoughtless volitions, arise out of that fundamental, that primordial state of unawareness, which of course is within oneself.

And then you can see how, as that volition or those volitions stumble on, as they bump into this and bump into that, they get a bit sensitive, they get a bit more aware, just a tiny glimmering of consciousness arises; and you see that, it's just a little seed of individuality, very tiny, very frail, very flimsy. And then you see this gradually developing into a whole psycho-physical organism, a mind and a body; and you can see it having its whole great history. And then you can see this mind, this body, this psycho-physical organism, coming in contact with the world, with objects; and then you can see the psycho-physical organism differentiating, developing different senses, developing a mind, a reason, developing sense-consciousnesses, developing sight, developing hearing and so on; and then through these senses you can see it coming into contact with the world and experiencing through the world all sorts of sensations - sensations of pleasure, sensations of pain, and you can see it shrinking away from the painful sensations and liking the pleasant sensations, trying to hang on to them, becoming attached to them, finally enslaved by them; and then becoming conditioned by them, and then just going on in that way, as it were rolling on, even rolling down hill, the Wheel taking another turn. And you can see this

happening in your own mind; you can see your own mind, your own reactive mind, working in this way. And the more you can see your mind working in this way, the more you can see your own psychological conditioning, the more you can see objectively, as something out there as it were, at the same time that you are actually experiencing it subjectively, the more you will become free from it. You become free from your own psychological conditioning to the extent that you see that you are psychologically conditioned. You become aware to the extent that you see that you are unaware, and you can do this with the help of this traditional formula of the twelve links of the chain as it were of conditioned co-production or dependent origination.

If you like to do the same sort of thing, achieve the same sort of results with the help of perhaps a more modern, a more contemporary type of psychological analysis, certainly one can do so; but what is essential in either case is that one sees how one's mind is merely reactive, not active, not spontaneous, not creative, but reactive, machine-like, unaware. And seeing like that, seeing it working like that, you become gradually more and more free from it.

So this, very briefly and I am afraid rather inadequately, is the method of meditation known as the contemplation of the chain of conditioned co-production or dependent origination, which is the method for overcoming the obstacle of ignorance, spiritual ignorance or unawareness.

Then fifthly and lastly, the defilement of what is traditionally called conceit, *imānai*. It's also translated pride. It's more like high-mindedness or even high-and-mightiness, if you like. Its method for overcoming is what is called the contemplation of the six elements; and the six elements are earth, water, fire, air, ether as it's translated, and consciousness.

Now how does one proceed in this method? You begin by concentrating yourself, by having a fair degree of mindfulness, and then you as it were attack this whole 'I' feeling, especially as applied to the body, thinking of the body as 'I' and 'me' analytically, and you proceed like this. You are as it were sitting there, you're meditating, and you think: 'Earth - earth', and you start getting a feeling of what earth is. It's everything solid, everything cohesive, and you can think of all sorts of things in the objective world which are made of earth, which are solid. You can think of natural things like trees and rock, you can think of man-made things like houses and books; all this is earth. And then you think: 'Not only is there earth, not only is there the element of earth in the external world, but there is also earth, the element of earth in that internal world, that subjective world, which is me; in me, in my physical body, the element of earth is present. In what form is it present? There's my bones, there's my flesh; these are all derivatives of the element earth. So where have these come from? Where have my bones come from? Where has my flesh come from? Where has this earth element in me come from? It's come from the earth element outside me. It's not mine; I've borrowed it, I've taken it from the earth element outside myself for a short time and incorporated it into my own being, my own substance, my own body, but I've only borrowed it. I'm not going to be able to keep it for ever. After a few years, maybe after a few hours, I've got to give it back. The earth element in my body will be resolved into the earth element in the objective world. So how can I say of that earth element that this is mine, how can I say of it that it is me? I've got to give it back. It's not mine, it isn't me. So all right, let it go, let that earth element which is in me go. I can't claim to possess it, it's not me, I can't identify with it.'

In the same way, you take up the element water. You think: 'Water - water.' Something fluid, liquid, flowing. You find it outside in the world, you find it in rivers, you find it in the oceans, you find it in streams, you find it in rain, you find it in dew, you find it in all these things. So

there's a water element in you: there's blood, there's bile, there are tears, etc. All these things are the water element in you. So where have you got that water from? Obviously from outside. And when you die it's got to be rendered back. So that water element doesn't belong to you, it's not part of you, it is not you, so let it go. Cease to identify with it.

Then fire - what about fire? There's the fire element in the external world. There's the sun, the source of all heat; all the heat, all the warmth, all the light in the solar system comes from the sun. So there's heat in us, warmth in us, but where does it come from? It comes from the external world, comes from the sun, comes from the fire element in the external world. 'One day I've got to give it back, I can't hold on to it for long. When I'm dead I'll just go cold. Heat will just disappear, just leave my body. So that fire element in me which at the moment is doing all sorts of things, digesting my food and so on according to traditional Indian ideas, that is not mine, it is not me, it doesn't belong to me. I can't identify with it, so let it go; let the heat element in me go back to the heat element in the universe.'

Then air, what about air? 'There's air in the external world, obviously. There's this atmosphere which envelops the whole earth; and then in me there's the breath, the breath of life, coming into my lungs, going from my lungs, which I'm inhaling, exhaling, all the time. But I've only borrowed it for a short while, it's not mine. A time will come when I'll breathe in and breathe out, breathe in, breathe out - and then I don't breathe in any more. I'll be dead, and there won't be any more breath left in my body, I'll have rendered it back. So I can't say of the air element in me that it's me or mine, so let it go, don't identify with it.'

Then space, or ether - what about that? 'The body that I at present have and with which I identify myself, made up of the first four elements, occupies space. So all right, when the earth element goes, the water element goes, the fire element goes, the air element goes from my body; what's left? Nothing. Just an empty space, an empty me-shaped space, that's all. So what is to differentiate that me-shaped space from the surrounding space? Nothing at all.' As the Indian tradition says, if you break a pot, a clay pot, the space which is inside the pot merges with the space outside the pot; there's no difference any more. So the space which was occupied by you, by your physical body, that space, when the body disintegrates, merges back into the universal space, as it were; you don't exist any more. You're not there. So how can you hang on even to this whole physical body at the moment occupying space? You can't. So let that space which is you, which you are occupying, merge into the universal space.

Then, sixthly and lastly, consciousness. Associated with your physical body is consciousness, and you might say: 'Even if I am not earth, if I'm not fire, if I'm not water, if I'm not air, if I'm not even space, at least I am consciousness.' But not even that. Even the consciousness is borrowed; even what you call your consciousness is a sort of reflection, a gleam, of some higher, more universal consciousness which in a sense is you, yes, but also, in a sense, very definitely is not you. You are it, maybe, or it is you, but you can't say that you are it in the ordinary sense or that it is you in the ordinary sense. It's rather like a dream, it's rather like some other dimension. Sometimes you may think in the waking state that you have the dream, but when you're experiencing the dream, where are you? It's as though the dream is having you. So it's like that in the case of this higher dimension of consciousness which we identify with me.

The consciousness is there, but the me as it were has to go. It's as though the lower consciousness has to merge itself - though again, without being destroyed, because it is consciousness, or at least it is conscious - in the higher consciousness. So even individuality in that sense, that 'I' sense, even that goes. There is no loss of consciousness, but consciousness

is no longer centred on the 'I'. But again, in another sense, you were never more completely yourself; it's just paradoxical.

These now are the five basic methods of meditation: to get rid of distraction, mindfulness of breathing; to get rid of aversion, development of universal loving-kindness; to get rid of craving, the recollection of death; to get rid of ignorance, contemplation of the chain of conditioned co-production; to get rid of conceit, contemplation of the six elements. I have mentioned all of these, I'm afraid, very briefly, but sufficiently perhaps to give you some idea of what they are all about

But a few more words about the sixth and last of these methods, the contemplation of the six elements. As we have seen, they are earth, water, fire, air, ether, consciousness. So a few words about the first five only, especially the first four. These first four or five are symbolised by different geometrical figures, so I'm going to ask you to try to imagine them, try to visualise them.

Try to visualise a great yellow cube. This is earth. Why it's a cube, why it's yellow, I hope will be obvious; I'm not going to explain it. So a great yellow cube. On top of that great yellow cube or earth, a great white sphere or globe; that is water. Then on top of that white sphere, a brilliant red cone or pyramid; that's fire. On top of that cone or pyramid, which is red, balanced on the point, a saucer, a blue saucer; that's air. And in that blue saucer, a golden flame; that's space, that's ether. The tip of that golden flame, if you like, can be all rainbow-coloured; it can end in a rainbow-like jewel, and that will be consciousness. So these are your geometrical symbols of the five or the six elements, and when you arrange them like this in this order, one on top of another, they add up to something, they form something, they create something, and what is that? It's the stupa; the stupa.

But what is the stupa? some of you may ask. This is a very long story indeed, and I'm only going to touch on it very briefly, but a stupa originally was a funeral monument of a rather special kind, and it sometimes contained ashes. And in the case of Buddhism, in the case of Buddhist history and tradition, the stupa is especially associated with the Parinirvana of the Buddha. In fact, the stupa in Buddhist symbolism, in Buddhist art, is actually the symbol of the Parinirvana itself.

It's not always appreciated that in the early days of Buddhism there was no representation of the figure of the Buddha. There were no Buddha images for several hundred years, and the Buddha's figure was not represented in sculpture of any kind in any way. Oh yes, you got all sorts of beautiful sculptured scenes, as at Sanchi, as in Amaravati. You get the scene of the Buddha's birth, the scene of the Buddha's austerities, the scene of the Buddha's victory over Mara, the scene of the Buddha's Enlightenment, the scene of the Buddha's first discourse, the scene of the Buddha's Parinirvana; but you never get the Buddha himself depicted. You get only a symbol. In the scene of the Buddha's birth, where the figure of the infant Buddha should be, there's just a lotus flower, no figure of the Buddha. In the scene of the Buddha leaving home, going out into the jungle in quest of Truth, you see the horse charging out of the palace gate, but you don't see the Buddha, there's only an umbrella over the horse's back to indicate where the figure would be.

In the same way, in the great scene of the Buddha's Enlightenment you see the Bodhi Tree, you see the throne, but the throne is empty; there's no figure on it. Or you may have a trident,

representing the Three Jewels. And in the same way, in the scene of the Buddha's first discourse, you get the five monks there, all listening; you get the preaching throne, you get the deer around - because it's a deer park - but you see no Buddha preaching, you just see a Wheel of the Dharma, just that abstract symbol. And in the same way, when it comes to the scene of the Buddha's Parinirvana, the Buddha's 'death', as we say, there's no Buddha lying there dying. What do you see? You see a stupa of one kind or another; a stupa, a reliquary if you like.

And of course there is a reason for this. The early Buddhists, it seems, felt very strongly that the Buddha is incommensurable, the Buddha is unrepresentable, the Buddha is Transcendental; that the Buddha's greatness is so great that no justice can be done to it, it cannot be described, it cannot be depicted. A Buddha, a Buddha's nature, is beyond thought, beyond speech, beyond words; so all you can do when you come to the Buddha is just to stop speaking, to remain silent. Or when you are drawing a picture or sculpting a scene from the Buddha's life, when you come to the Buddha, just leave an empty space or put in a symbol. You can't represent the Buddha; the Buddha is beyond representation. This is the reason for this. This is why we have the stupa symbolising the Buddha in the representation of the Parinirvana scene.

This reference to the stupa, this reference to the Parinirvana, brings us back to the event that we are commemorating today, that is to say the 'death' of the Buddha. But obviously the 'death' of the Buddha wasn't an ordinary death, because the Buddha wasn't an ordinary person. As we've just seen, not only his own immediate disciples but those who followed for many generations felt very strongly that the Buddha was so great that there could be no thought of his greatness, no conception of his greatness, no representation of it, even, in artistic form. The Buddha's true nature was unfathomable.

Even during the Buddha's lifetime, we know from the scriptures that even the close disciples were sometimes very puzzled by the question of the Buddha's nature - who the Buddha was, what the Buddha was, what would happen to the Buddha at death. We don't know why, but apparently in the days of the Buddha quite a lot of the disciples and quite a large number of members of the public were very interested in this question of what would happen to the Buddha when he died. It seemed to fascinate them, and there was a regular way of putting it which they had. They used to come to the Buddha himself sometimes and say: 'Lord, after death does the Tathagata (that is to say, the Buddha) exist, or does he not exist, or both, or neither?' And the Buddha always gave the same reply. He would always say: 'It is inappropriate to say of a Buddha that after death he exists. It is inappropriate to say of a Buddha that after death he does not exist. It is inappropriate to say of a Buddha that after death he exists and does not exist - exists in one sense, doesn't exist in another sense. And it is inappropriate to say of a Buddha that after death he neither exists nor does not exist.' He says, 'All ways of telling, all ways of describing, are totally inapplicable to the Buddha, to the Tathagata.'

So from this we can understand that the Buddha's death is not death in the ordinary sense at all, and this is why in the Buddhist tradition it is termed, usually, the Parinirvana. We don't say the Buddha died, we say he attained Parinirvana. And what does this word Parinirvana mean? Nirvana, of course, means Enlightenment, Buddhahood, and so on. iParii means supreme. What's the difference? There's no difference at all. The only difference, a quite minor one, is that in the case of inirvanai, the Buddha's physical body continues to be attached. In the case of the Parinirvana the physical body is no longer attached. The experience is the same. The inirvanai, or if you like the nirvanic nature of the Nirvana, remains the same. One is called inirvanai with remainder - this is the traditional description - the other is called inirvanai without

remainder. So from the Buddha's point of view, as it were, there's no difference at all between the two states: before death, after death, it's completely the same for the Buddha, whatever it is, which we can't describe, which we can't know. The only difference is - and this difference only affects other people, the disciples - is that in one case the physical body is there, in the other case the physical body of the Buddha is not there. That's the only difference, and from the Buddha's point of view, attaining as he does nirvanai, there's no difference between the two states whatever.

Now the circumstances under which the Buddha attained Parinirvana - these are described at some length in the scriptures, and we'll be having readings from some passages later on this evening. Perhaps the final scene of all is best depicted, best represented, not so much in words but in the art of the Buddhist Far East, and it's interesting to note that the scene is laid in the open air. It's sometimes emphasised that the Buddha was born in the open air, under a tree, he gained Enlightenment in the open air, under a tree, and he passed away in the open air, under trees. And this is the scene which is painted by these great Chinese and Japanese artists of the medieval period. By this time they'd felt able to actually represent the person of the Buddha himself in art.

So you see first of all the beautiful forest background and the grove of sal trees. Sal trees are beautiful straight trees, almost like telegraph poles, with beautiful big green leaves and beautiful big white flowers. There's a grove of these not far from Kusinara in north-eastern India, and at the foot of these sal trees there's a stone couch which was built by the local people as a resting place for people wandering in that grove. So on that stone couch the Buddha laid himself down at full length, and this is the scene painted by these Chinese master painters: the Buddha lying full length on the stone couch beneath these beautiful straight sal trees, which are showering down white blossoms upon him. And all around are the disciples; the close disciples sitting near his head, in their yellow robes, and then brahmin disciples, princes, ministers; ascetics, fire worshippers, merchants, peasants, traders. And even the animal world: you see all around elephants, goats, deer, horses, dogs - even the cat, who according to tradition wasn't in the least upset by it all. Even mice, even birds are depicted, all around - the whole of creation. And up in the sky, clouds, gods, goddesses, everybody has come as it were to witness the Buddha's Parinirvana. This is what these great Chinese artists depict - not just an ordinary incident in someone's life, but an event as it were of cosmic significance, the Buddha's final Parinirvana.

And as you look more closely at the picture, you notice that most of the people, most of the beings in the picture, even the animals, are weeping. The elephant in particular, you notice, seems to be shedding tears. But a few of the disciples, those who are closest to the Buddha, those who are seated near his head, they're not weeping at all, they're perfectly calm, because they see beyond the physical body. They see that really there's going to be no change at all, just from nirvanai to Parinirvana; no real change whatsoever.

So this is the scene; this is the scene depicted by these great masters of Chinese and Japanese Buddhist art, and this is the scene that we are commemorating, that we are remembering, today. And we commemorate, we remember, in the first place out of gratitude to the Buddha for giving the teaching, and in the second place because any recollection of death can only redound to our own spiritual development. Obviously there is no question of remembering just today but not other days. We must try to remember all the time, and we may say that the recollection of death must be constant, or at least frequent. And in this way the defilement of craving, at least, can be overcome, and there'll be all sorts of other side effects. We'll be more energetic, more



zealous, more vigorous; less inclined to waste time, because we'll realise how precious time is; less attached to material things, more generous. This is supposed to be one of the special fruits of the recollection of death: you become more liberal-minded. You hang on to things less, you share with people much more. Then you become less afraid of death, more happy, more carefree. And above all, you develop a better insight into the impermanence of all conditioned things, a better insight into the true nature of existence; so that when - though, of course, when that will be we don't know - when we also come to die, as die we must, we too perhaps, we hope, shall go from nirvanai to Parinirvana, or if that isn't possible at least we shall be going from happiness to greater happiness, from understanding and Insight to greater understanding.