

Lecture 118: The Path of Regular Steps and the Path of Irregular Steps
Urgyen Sangharakshita
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Mr Humphries and Friends,

It seems quite a long time since I last spoke in this place. In fact I was doing some calculations only a few minutes ago and I discovered that it was now eight years since I had the opportunity of addressing an audience in this place. And in the course of those eight years a very great deal indeed has happened. A great deal has happened in the world outside, happened politically, happened, of course, economically - we all know that very well - happened perhaps culturally, too. And not only in this greater world, but also in our, in one sense smaller, in one sense even bigger, world of Buddhism in the West, in England, things have been happening and changes have been taking place. Possibly it's not too great an exaggeration to say that in the course of the last eight years the whole character, the whole face, of Buddhism in England; perhaps in the West generally, has radically and crucially changed. If I was asked to describe that change, if I was asked to put just one word to it, I would say that as compared with a few years ago, as compared with eight years ago, people who participate in, who are involved in, the Buddhist movement, are now involved in it much more existentially, much more deeply, much more whole-heartedly than ever before. People, I find as I talk to them nowadays, are much more concerned with the actual application of the Dharma, of the teaching of the Buddha, to all aspects of their lives. And for this reason they seem to be putting a greater and ever greater amount of effort into the actual treading of the Path. We may say that people are making an even greater effort to evolve than before. And because they are doing this, because they are more existentially involved, because they're more whole-hearted, because they are putting more energy, more effort, into their spiritual lives, into their own evolution, changes are, of course, taking place in them; changes in their being, changes in their consciousness, and because of this change, because they are different when they look out on the world, they begin to see things differently; they begin to **experience** things differently; not as before. What was formerly of importance, or what **seemed** to be of importance, becomes no longer of importance, and vice versa. Of course, as one gets more deeply involved, as one changes, there are problems; new problems, perhaps even quite difficult problems, arising, and also there are splendid new opportunities.

And one can say, perhaps, that in the course of this last eight years, if one has been coming along regularly, if one has been involved in the movement continuously, one's Buddhist life has simultaneously during this period broadened and deepened. And not only that, as one actually treads the Path, as, in fact, one oneself **becomes** that Path - because one is now beginning to **be** the Path, not just to think about it as something objective - as one is to some extent oneself now the Path, one begins to understand the nature of that Path even more clearly than ever before. One begins to see that within, as it were, the one great central Path there are different paths; as it were minor paths. Or rather, one may say, one begins to see there are different ways of following the Path; some ways, perhaps, more helpful than others. And as one evolves in this way, as one's experience deepens in this way, as one gets to know the Path better than before, one begins in particular to appreciate the importance for one's whole future spiritual development of what we may describe as the absolutely basic distinction between the Path of Regular Steps and the Path of Irregular Steps.

Now this distinction is a very ancient one; it goes back very far; it isn't something of which I've thought myself. It goes back to the East, it goes back to China, it goes back to sixth-century China, it goes back to that great Chinese teacher Chih-I, well known as the founder of one of the greatest and most important of all the schools of Chinese Buddhism. the T'ien-t'ai School, a school which, although it is one of the greatest that Buddhism has known, has, for some reason or other, been rather neglected by Western Buddhists so far. And this great founder of this School, this great Chinese Buddhist teacher, this great Chinese Buddhist master, in the course of his lifetime preached the Dharma very widely, very extensively, founded monasteries, and managed to attract on account of his very deep spiritual attainments, an extraordinarily large number of disciples. And these disciples he addressed from time to time, commenting upon the Scriptures, speaking about the spiritual life, and especially, it seems, speaking about meditation. And many discourses have come down to us, many discourses on the subject of meditation, delivered by this great Chinese Master, Chih-I. And in the course of his discourses delivered to his disciples on the subject of meditation, he spoke of 'Meditation by Regular Steps', and he also spoke of 'Meditation by Irregular Steps', and again, he sometimes spoke of 'Meditation Without any Steps At All'!

Now when one mentions this third kind of Meditation - 'Meditation without Any Steps At All' or 'the Meditation of No Steps' - one at once finds people becoming rather interested. Huh? [*Murmurs of amusement*] They're not all that interested in 'Meditation by Regular Steps'. That sounds rather dull, rather prosaic. 'Meditation by Irregular Steps' appeals to them quite a bit, but what really captivates and fascinates them [*laughter*] is this idea of 'meditation with no steps at all'. Apparently you just get straight there from the beginning! But unfortunately the attraction is usually entirely for the wrong reasons, so this evening we are not going to say anything at all about meditation without steps!

Tonight we are concerned only with Regular Steps and Irregular Steps, because this distinction, this distinction which was stressed by this great Chinese master Chih-I, this distinction between meditation by regular steps and meditation by irregular steps, is applicable not only to the practice of meditation but to the practice, to the experience, of the whole spiritual Path; the whole spiritual life, in all its stages and in all its aspects. And this fact, that one can approach the spiritual Path, approach the spiritual life, either by way of regular steps or by way of irregular steps, is well and widely understood throughout the Buddhist East, even though the distinction is not always made in these particular terms. So far as the West is concerned, so far as Western Buddhist circles are concerned, it's only very recently indeed that people have begun to pay some attention to this distinction, have begun to appreciate the importance of the distinction between the Path of Regular Steps and the Path of Irregular Steps. In fact I believe it's only very recently that the distinction has even been mentioned, not to speak of discussed, or spoken about, or written about, and perhaps there's a reason for that. Perhaps it's only now, perhaps it's only in these last few months or this last year or so that we've reached in the West, in this country, in Buddhist circles, a point where this distinction between the Path of Regular Steps and the Path of Irregular Steps becomes meaningful for us and helpful for us and even, I may say, **necessary** for us, if we are to continue and make progress.

So the question arises: what is this Path of Regular Steps; what is the Path of Irregular Steps? And I propose to be a little irregular myself this evening, and deal with the second first - that is to say, with the Path of Irregular Steps, first.

Now in order to understand this, in order to understand what the Path of Irregular Steps is, we must look around us; look around us not just at the great world outside, politically, economically, culturally, but just look around in our own **Buddhist** circles. Look around us at Buddhism as it actually exists in the Western world today, whether in this country or in Germany, or France, or Italy, or Hungary, or the United States of America. Look around at Buddhism as it actually exists in the Western world today. And when we look around, perhaps look around for the first time, what is it that we see? What do we see first of all? What do we encounter first of all? What is the most conspicuous feature of Buddhism in the West? What do we see first? Well, first of all, I think most of you will agree, first of all we see books. Books. Books about Buddhism. Hundreds of Books. We see big books and we see small books. Little pamphlets from the East. Lavishly illustrated volumes from leading publishing houses in London and New York. We see very popular books - so popular that anybody can read and understand them, and very scholarly books; so scholarly that only perhaps two or three of us can follow them. We see books on the Theravada; we see books on the Mahayana; of course we see books on Zen. Books on the Tantra. Books written by Buddhists, of various persuasions. Books written by non-Buddhists. Books, on Buddhism that is, written by anti-Buddhists. And books written by all sorts of people who don't know where they are or **what** they are. Some of these books are original works, the product of much independent thought and study; others are translations, translations from Sanskrit, translations from Pali, Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese, Burmese, Thai, Sinhalese, French, German, Italian, Russian. There's hundreds and hundreds of books. And that's the first thing that we see when we look about us at Buddhism in this Western world; the first thing of which we become conscious - books. And at first, especially if we are young and enthusiastic, have lots of time, we start trying to read these books; if possible, all of them! [*Laughter*] Or at least, as many as we can. At least some of the better-known ones. And we usually, I think you'll agree, we usually read quite a lot. Quite a lot. Some of us may even get around to reading the scriptures. And in this way, by virtue of our reading, our very miscellaneous reading, reading all the books on Buddhism that we can possibly get hold of, we start forming an idea, an impression, about Buddhism - even **ideas** about Buddhism. But we find, though we ourselves may not be aware of the fact, that our ideas about Buddhism, derived from our reading about Buddhism, are usually very confused indeed. We may say that they're so confused that we don't even **begin** to realise until **years** afterwards, in many cases, how confused they are. In some cases we may never realise it. But meanwhile we think that we understand Buddhism because we've read about it. We think that we know all about it. And if we're not careful, after a few years, we may be tempted to share our understanding - that is to say, our **confusion** - with other people, so that we may be tempted to start writing and speaking about Buddhism, and in this way we may even become quite well known. You may even have five or six

people, ten or twelve people, sitting at our feet listening to us and drinking in our words of wisdom, and with a little luck we may even appear on TV! [Laughter] With a little more luck we may even be invited to represent Buddhism - whatever that may mean - at some inter-religious meet, somewhere in London. But all the time, what is really the position?

The position is that we do not understand Buddhism at all. Now when I say 'at all' I mean this quite literally: not that we have a little understanding of Buddhism; that we've grasped just a portion of it - the position is we do not understand Buddhism **at all**. But we think we do. Now, a very important consequence follows. When we **understand** a thing - whether we really understand it or just think we understand it - when we understand a thing, we become, as it were, superior to that thing. Understanding means appropriating. It means taking the object of knowledge unto oneself. It means, as it were, taking it **into** oneself, making it one's own, a part of oneself, and for this reason, because understanding means appropriating, we speak in terms of 'mastering' a subject; we speak in terms of 'mastering', say, accountancy, 'mastering' mathematics, and we even speak, or at least think, of sort of 'mastering' Buddhism. So because we understand Buddhism, we think we understand, we think we have understood, because we have appropriated, made part of ourselves, we become, or we feel, sort of superior to Buddhism; we've incorporated it, we've made it part and parcel of ourselves. So we feel superior to Buddhism and because we feel superior to it, because we know, we've 'mastered' it, we don't look up to it, and because we don't look up to it, because we think we've understood it, we think we've mastered it, we don't feel towards Buddhism any real devotion, any real reverence. We're devoid of that. There's no feeling. No looking up. No warmth. No devotion, No reverence. We've just 'mastered' the subject.

Now this kind of attitude is not new in this country, in the West. It's by no means confined to modern Western Buddhists. This sort of attitude has been widespread in the Western world for quite a long time. And a hundred and fifty years ago, even, we find the great poet and thinker, Coleridge, complaining about this sort of attitude, complaining of course within a Christian context. We find that on May 15th 1833 he delivered himself of these sentiments:

There is now no reverence for anything, and the reason is that men possess conceptions only, and all their knowledge is conceptional only. Now, as to conceive is a work of the mere understanding, and as all that can be conceived may be comprehended, it is impossible that a man should reverence that to which he must always feel something in himself superior. If it were possible to conceive God in a strict sense, that is as we conceive a horse or a tree, even God himself could not excite any reverence.

And 'reverence', Coleridge goes on to say,

is only due from man and is only excitable in man towards ideal truths, which are always mysteries to the understanding, for the same reason that the motion of my finger behind my back is a mystery to you now, your eyes not being made for seeing through my body.

So this what Coleridge said on the subject of lack of reverence one hundred and fifty years ago. And at about the same time we find, in Germany, an even greater poet, an even greater thinker, saying much the same thing but rather more briefly than Coleridge. We find Goethe, in his *'Reflections and Maxims'*, saying:

The finest achievement for men of thought is to have fathomed the fathomable, and quietly to revere the unfathomable.

So we may say that it is this quiet revering of the unfathomable - that which cannot be understood, cannot be comprehended - which is *attakkavacara* - in Buddhist terminology; beyond the reach of thought, beyond the reach of understanding and conception, it's this quiet revering of the unfathomable that until recently has been so lacking among Western Buddhists. We may say that we've been much too quick to understand, much too ready to speak, even about the unfathomable. In fact, we can even say that we've been much too ready to speak **especially** about the unfathomable.

Now, this is not altogether our fault. To a great extent it's the result of the situation in which we find ourselves. As I've said, as I've insisted even, there are so many books on Buddhism, so many translations of ancient Buddhist texts, and some of this material, we must admit in all humility, some of this material is extremely advanced. Some of this material - and I'm thinking now of Sutras and translations of Sutras - some of this material is addressed to disciples of a high degree of spiritual development. Addressed, for instance, to the great Bodhisattvas, and I'm sure many of you are

familiar with the opening scenes of some of the great Mahayana Sutras. You find the Buddha seated in the midst of a great concourse of disciples, perhaps in some heavenly, some archetypal, world and you are told, the Sutra tells you, that all around the Buddha are seated enlightened disciples, Arahants, great Bodhisattvas, even irreversible Bodhisattvas, Bodhisattvas who cannot regress from the ideal of Supreme Buddhahood, Bodhisattvas who have, as it were, Nirvana in the palm of their hand, and these teachings are addressed to these great spiritual beings; sublime truths are uttered addressed to these great spiritual beings on a very high level of spirituality indeed, beyond all that we can think of, beyond all that we can dream, beyond all that we can imagine.

And now many of these Sutras are translated; the words are translated, made available in a sense to us, and we read and we understand and we think we have mastered the contents of that particular Sutra, that particular translation. So because we think that we have mastered it, we know it, we've understood it, we've read it, we know all about it, the result is that we adopt, or we tend to adopt, a rather cool, a rather casual, a rather superior, even a rather patronising attitude to Buddhism, to such an extent that some of us might even think it unnecessary to call ourselves Buddhists at all. After all, we've gone beyond all that. And we may even look down somewhat on those rather simple-minded folk even in the West who do choose to call themselves Buddhists, who actually pay their respects to images, who actually offer flowers and light candles, who actually try to observe the precepts. So they may feel that our attitude is quite different from all that, much more advanced. But the truth is that our attitude is really purely theoretical, purely mental, and devoid of all real, deep, genuine, authentic feeling of reverence and devotion, and because of all this, because of this purely theoretical, this purely mental approach, because of this absence, this lack, of all devotional feeling, of all 'quiet revering of the unfathomable' in Buddhism, until recently, until recent years, our Western Buddhism tended to be a rather shallow and a rather superficial thing. And Western Buddhists tended rather to pick and choose from the material available, to select - not according to their real genuine spiritual needs, but according to quite subjective and superficial whims and fancies. So you find people saying, 'I like this bit. I don't like that bit. I'm happy with the idea of karma but I don't like the idea of rebirth.' Or you find people drawn very much by the doctrine of *anatta*; the thought or the idea that they don't have a soul or a self - this seems rather to attract some people for some reason or other, but at the same time they find the thought of Nirvana rather depressing.

So in this way people have tended to pick and choose, to select, and of course their likes and dislikes change. For a while one may be very much into Zen, because one rather likes the idea that one is already a Buddha, that you are just that, you're there already, that there's nothing to do; it seems to make life a lot easier: one doesn't have to practise anything, apparently, doesn't have to give up anything. So you rather like Zen - for a while. But eventually you get rather bored with being a Buddha [*Laughter*] so you start getting into the Tantra [*Laughter*], and Tantra, of course, immediately conjures up visions of **sex**, you start getting into the Yoga of sex - theoretically, of course! [*Laughter*] And in this way, the average Western Buddhist has been browsing and dabbling all these years. But even so, despite all these difficulties; and they are difficulties which every one of us has experienced; despite all these difficulties, some Western Buddhists do get around to **practising** Buddhism. I'd say, on the basis of my personal experience, seeing so many people coming and going, passing through, I'd say that perhaps, at a conservative estimate, one in twenty Western Buddhists get round actually to trying to practise Buddhism.

Eventually it dawns on them that Buddhism isn't just a collection of interesting ideas - not just a philosophy - not just something to think about. Eventually it dawns on them that Buddhism is something to be applied, something, even, to be experienced. So they start trying to practise it; start trying to put it into operation, but, unfortunately, so strong is the force of conditioning and habit that even when they start trying to practise Buddhism, the same old pattern, as it were, derived from their previously theoretical approach, persists; even though they **are** trying to practise, their attitude is still shallow and superficial: they still tend to pick and choose, to select.

Now so far I've tended rather to deal in generalities, and generalities aren't always very interesting or very helpful, so at this point let us take up for consideration a concrete example; an example that might be anybody. Let's take the case of a young Englishman who, three-quarters of the way through the Twentieth Century, in this country, starts trying to practise Buddhism, actually to practise it. And let's call him John. I'm sure there must be at least a dozen Johns present - apparently it's the most common Christian name. Now John is 24, and he's been interested in Buddhism since he was twelve. That's not unusual. And he has read several hundred books on the subject. He has read Evans-Wentz, he has read Charles Luk, Govinda, Guenther, Grimm(?), Glassenapp, Tucci, Trungpa, Conze, Suzuki, Christmas Humphreys, Sangharakshita, not to speak of all the lesser lights. [*Laughter*]. You name a

book on Buddhism and John has read it. So at last, having read all these books over all these years, John gets around to practising Buddhism. So what does he do? Where does he go? He goes along to a meditation class. And in that meditation class, week by week, he learns a technique of concentration. He learns how to concentrate his mind. And he goes along, say, every week for about a couple of months. And he gets on quite well. He's able to achieve a measure of concentration and to hold it at least for five or ten minutes - sometimes even fifteen minutes - without any wandering thoughts arising. But after two or three months he starts finding the whole thing rather dull and rather boring. Nothing much seems to be happening. He's just getting into a nice concentrated state. There are no wonderful visions, no revelations, no divine voices speaking to him, so he gets a bit bored, a bit fed up. So luckily for John, he happens to hear just then that a wonderful new meditation teacher has just arrived from the East. So of course he goes straight along to his class instead, sits at the feet of this wonderful new teacher from the East, who's got a wonderful, beautiful, big long beard [*Laughter*] and looks absolutely everything that a teacher from the East should look. So the first thing that the teacher tells John is to forget whatever he learned before about meditation. He says, 'It's all wrong. They've been teaching you wrong; they don't know a thing about it!', so of course this rather confuses John. A bit of a shock to him. But anyway he starts practising with that new teacher the new method, the new technique, of meditation, and he gets on quite well. In fact, he gets on about as well as before with that previous technique - neither better, nor worse, just about the same. But anyway he continues. But unfortunately, after two months, a rather serious setback occurs - the wonderful new teacher just disappears. I don't mean magically! John goes along to the class one evening, he just isn't there! And people say Well, we think he's gone back to India. Others say he's gone to America. There are different reports. So poor John is left high and dry; he doesn't know what to do.

So he joins a Sufi group! He finds the people rather nice, rather pleasant, rather sociable, but he doesn't get anything out of the teaching! In fact there isn't any teaching, because everything's one. So back he goes to Buddhism. Of course, back to reading books about Buddhism. And one day he happens to read a book about Buddhism and vegetarianism. He thinks, 'Well, that's very interesting! Buddhists aren't supposed to eat meat! I never realised that before. Not supposed to take alcohol either. I hadn't thought of that before! In fact, Buddhists are not supposed to do quite a number of things.' This had not struck him before. Hadn't realised it before. So preoccupied with the philosophy - you know, Nirvana, Sunyata, Void, Madhyamika, One Mind, he hadn't thought, it hadn't occurred to him, that there might be, you know, quite simple practical things to do, precepts to practise. In other words, John begins to see that there's an ethical side to Buddhism. Formerly he just hadn't time for anything as elementary as that, but now he starts thinking about it quite seriously, and he actually starts trying to practise the precepts. At least a few of them, rather gingerly. He gives up meat, stops drinking, stops smoking, and he tries very hard not to tell lies, not even to exaggerate! In fact, John becomes, to be quite honest, a bit puritanical. He starts carrying it a bit too far. But anyway, he's sincere, and as a result of his practice of the precepts he starts feeling like practising meditation. again.

Unfortunately there are no more wonderful new teachers around, so back he goes to the old class which is still carrying on. And again he gets into the regular practice, does quite well and after some months is able to sit for a couple of hours without difficulty. Then, one day, a rather strange thing happens. John arrives late for the weekly class - he's rather tired. He works in an office and has had rather a heavy day, and he's not very pleased, to be honest, about having to go along to the meditation class. He thinks, 'Well, I'm feeling tired and it's all going to be rather a drag', rather a waste of time. But anyway he goes and he sits. And strange to say, without any warning, after he's been sitting for a few minutes he finds himself in a quite different mental state, a quite different state of consciousness, and he doesn't know how he got into it. He's hardly aware of his body, everything seems very bright, very luminous, very buoyant; he feels fresh; there's no trace of tiredness. It's as though some inexhaustible spring is welling up within him. It's as though his whole being is expanding, and he begins to see, he begins to glimpse things that he'd never glimpsed before, with all his reading of books, with all his understanding, and a great wave of bliss descends upon him, and he feels as he had never felt before, and never thought to feel before. And how long he remains in this state, this completely different state of consciousness, he just doesn't know. It may be ten minutes, it may even be half an hour, but, whatever it is, the experience has a very profound effect on John. He knows now that there is some higher state of consciousness, of being. It's not just words, it's not just theory any more. It's not just something that he's read in a book. He knows that this is what Buddhism is all about, or this is the **beginning** of what Buddhism is all about. He feels that some progress at last has been made. And he's so impressed, so elated even, that he starts thinking of becoming a monk, going

to the East, leading an ascetic life, and so on. He feels he can even gain Enlightenment quite soon. He starts feeling that he's getting quite near. So he's quite elated, he's quite pleased with himself, and he becomes a bit expansive, a bit more outward-going than before, and at this point Mara starts taking an interest in John. *[Laughter]* Mara had not bothered before about John. After all, it wasn't necessary, because some of the books that John had been reading did Mara's work for him! *[Laughter]* Now there was a girl who used to come along to the meditation class. She'd been coming for several weeks. John hadn't ever spoken to her because he was too shy, but in his present elated, expansive mood he loses his shyness and he speaks to the girl, that week, and speaks to her the following week and they become friends, and to cut short a not very long story, John falls violently in love with the girl. But the girl - perverse creature that she is - doesn't fall in love with him. She's in love with somebody else. So poor John! He can't eat, he can't sleep, and, of course, he can't meditate! And he forgets all about his wonderful experience. It's as though it had never been. And this is something that we all experience from time to time. You can get into a wonderful, exalted state and you really think, 'There's going to be no trouble after this, no more problems after this: I really know now; I shall never be a fool again! I shall never do anything wrong again!' But a few days later, even a few **hours** later, you are back where you were before, apparently. So it's like that with John. It's as though that experience had never been. He forgets all about Buddhism. He doesn't go to the meditation class any more because he can't bear to meet the girl. In fact he feels like committing suicide.

But one day someone invites him to a party. Now John doesn't go to parties usually. As I said, he's become a bit puritanical. But he's feeling so miserable that he accepts, and goes to the party and gets drunk. Bang goes a precept, of course. And he wakes up next morning with a terrible headache. But John is young. Youth is resilient, and eventually he gets over his disappointment. And when I last heard of him he wasn't trying to observe the precepts any more, he'd given up meditation, but he was very busy reading books on Tantric Buddhism and was thinking of taking up the study of Tibetan.

Now we may say it's very easy to smile at John. It's quite easy to feel superior to John. But what in fact has been happening? What has John been doing? Well, John has been following the Path of Irregular Steps - following the Path of Irregular Steps. And this is what we all do. Perhaps what we all **have** to do, at least for a while, at least for a time. We practise now this kind of meditation, and now that, and then, maybe, we don't meditate **at all** for a while. For a while we observe the precepts quite strictly; we're quite puritanical, but then after a while, for another period of time, we just don't bother about the precepts any more. One day we feel like giving up everything, and going off to the East, becoming a monk; next day we start wondering if Buddhism is for us at all. So we follow The Path of Irregular Steps and sometimes those steps of ours are very irregular indeed! But it can't be helped. In our present circumstances, probably, it is difficult to start practising Buddhism in any other way. Fifty years ago, when the Buddhist Society was founded and when I was born there was very **little** Buddhism in the West, in any form, whether books or otherwise, but now the situation is very different. We could say that there's even too much Buddhism around. There are so many books, so many practices, so many teachers, so many schools represented, so much. A bewildering confusion and profusion of forms of Buddhism. So in our excitement, in our greed, we sort of snatch at this, snatch at that, a bit here, a bit there, just like, we may say, a greedy child in a sweetshop. We're in the sort of transcendental sweetshop of Buddhism and all these beautiful spiritual goodies around us. We grab this and grab that - Zen, Tantra, Theravada, Ethics, Meditation, this sort of meditation, that sort of meditation - we grab. That's our attitude, very often. But we do make some progress in this way. The Path of Irregular Steps **is a Path** and it does give us **some** experience of Buddhism.

But only up to a point. As we practise in this way, as we follow the Path of Irregular Steps, we find, sooner or later, that we are slowing down. We find sooner or later that we are up against a sort of invisible obstacle. It's as though we've got into a sort of doldrums. We're stagnating, we're not going forward. We're going through the movements, through the motions of following the Path of Irregular Steps, but nothing is happening. It's all come to a standstill. And if we want to overcome this invisible obstacle, if we want to make **further** progress and to continue that progress there must be a radical change. And what is that change? That change is that we must make the transition, the great transition, from the Path of Irregular Steps to the Path of Regular Steps. Now why is this? What **is** the Path of Regular Steps? And how does it differ from the Path of Irregular Steps? And why does further progress depend upon our making the transition from the one to the other?

Now we can't answer this question, we can't understand this matter, without first understanding the nature of the Path in general; that is to say the Path from what Buddhists call the Samsara, the round of existence, to Nirvana, the Path from Conditioned to Unconditioned being, the Path from unenlightened humanity to the Enlightened humanity of the Buddha. Now this great Path, which constitutes the main theme of Buddhism on the practical side - this great Path to Nirvana, to the

Unconditioned, to Buddhahood - is traditionally divided into three great successive stages: the stage of *sila*, the stage of *samadhi*, the stage of *prajna* - that is to say, the stage of morality, the stage of meditation and the stage of wisdom. There are many other ways of dividing, and even subdividing, the Path, but this is the most important, and most fundamental, this threefold division into the successive stages of *sila*, *samadhi*, *prajna* - Morality, Meditation, Wisdom.

Sila - morality - is simply skilful action, action which benefits oneself, which helps oneself to grow, to develop, and action which benefits others too, helps them to grow, helps them to develop. And *sila* is not just the external action divorced from attitude, from mental attitude: *Sila* comprises the attitude as well. It's the attitude and the mode of behaviour in which that attitude naturally expresses itself. So *sila* is skilful action; that is to say, action issuing from, based upon, certain skilful mental states, especially states of love, states of generosity, and states of peace and contentment. *Sila* is everything that one does out of or because of these skilful mental states. That, essentially, is what morality is, ethics is, in Buddhism, action issuing from those skilful mental states.

And then **Samadhi**. *samadhi*, or meditation, comprises all sorts of things. It's a word with many different meanings on a number of different levels. *Samadhi* means first of all the gathering together of all one's scattered energies; the bringing of them together into, as it were, a single focus. Most of the time, much of the time, our energies are divided, they go here and there, they are scattered, they are not unified, they are not integrated. So first we must integrate all our energies. This doesn't mean forcibly concentrating on a particular point. It means bringing **all** the energies together, harmonising, integrating, conscious and unconscious energies, in a natural, spontaneous manner towards a single point. So concentration is complete unification of psycho-spiritual energies. And this is the first grade, the first level, of *samadhi*.

And then *samadhi* comprises - after the integration of all these psycho-physical and psycho-spiritual energies - the experience of higher and ever higher states, grades, levels, of consciousness, extending even into what we call the Dhyana states, the states of superconsciousness where we are above the body, above the mind. The mind has stopped working long ago: we're in higher states; we experience bliss, peace, joy, ecstasy, but not insight. We're still within Samsara, still within the realm of the mundane. And *samadhi* also comprises the development of certain what we may describe as hidden powers of mind; certain aspects of functioning which are usually considered occult, supernormal, or even, though wrongly, supernatural. We may find that certain faculties such as telepathy, or clairvoyance, clairaudience, develop quite naturally, spontaneously, and in some cases even an insight into one's previous existences, stretching back into the past, life before life, may arise as well. So all this, and even more, comprises *samadhi*, the second great successive stage of that Path to the Unconditioned, to Nirvana.

And then thirdly, **Prajna**, wisdom, and this means not only worldly wisdom, not any conditioned understanding, not anything conceptual or theoretical. It means direct insight into the truth, into Reality, into the ultimate, direct **contact** with Reality, **experience** of Reality, which is at first momentary, just a flash, a mere glimpse, that comes and goes like a lightning flash, but which eventually becomes more and more lasting, which eventually becomes a sort of single continuous beam penetrating, as it were, into the depths of reality, probing into infinity itself; and when this *prajna*, when this insight, when this experience, when this wisdom, is fully developed, this is what we call Bodhi, or Enlightenment itself, and at that level we can't speak of it in these, as it were, gnostic terms, we have to speak of it also at that level in terms of unlimited love and compassion. A transcendental love, transcendental compassion - not what we usually call by those names.

So these are the three divisions of the Path, the three great successive stages, very broadly, but the whole of Buddhism, on the practical side, is here, and these three divisions, these three great successive stages of the Path, are not arbitrary. They're not arbitrary markings off, or chalkings off of stages; they are inherent in the Path itself: they represent natural stages in the spiritual and transcendental development of the individual. They're rather like, we may say, the stages in the growth of a plant. First there's the seed. From the seed comes forth a little shoot, then it grows into a stem, leaves are produced, and finally buds and flowers; but of course we mustn't push an analogy of this sort too far: it's only an analogy. In the case of a flower, in the case of a plant, the whole process is, as it were, unconscious. The flower does not have to decide whether it will grow or not. Nature, as it were, decides for it. But in the case of a human being, in **our** case, spiritual development is conscious and deliberate and must be so. Man is dependent for **his** growth, his further growth, on his own individual, personal effort. Though at the same time it must be understood that this is not a matter of egoistic willing, but of total growth and development; growth and development of the whole being.

Spiritual development, we can also say, can be compared, from another point of view, with the construction of a house, or any multi-storey building. We lay first the foundations, then we build the first storey, then the second, and finally we put on the roof, or the belfry, or the steeple, or whatever else it may be.

Now in Buddhism, in the Dharma, as it has come down to us, there are very many different teachings, and these teachings correspond to different stages of the path. Not all teachings pertain to the same stage or stages; different teachings pertain to **different** stages of the Path; refer to, or are concerned with, different stages of the Path. In other words they refer to, they pertain to, different stages of human spiritual and transcendental development. So we practise, or we should practise, those teachings which correspond to the stage of development which we have actually reached, and reached not just mentally, not just theoretically, but with our whole being, and this is the traditional method, or the predominant traditional method. We first practise morality. We observe the precepts. We become thoroughly ethical individuals both inwardly and outwardly, and this may take several years. And then, when our moral life, when our ethical individuality, has been relatively firmly established, when we are ethical individuals, we then take up the practice of concentration. And we learn to concentrate the unruly wandering mind, and we learn to concentrate upon any object, for any length of time, at will. And this may take several years more. And then, slowly, very slowly, we start raising the level of consciousness: first Dhyana, second Dhyana, third Dhyana, and so on, and one trains oneself gradually step by step, not just to touch them, but even to dwell upon them constantly, even to dwell **in** them. And last of all, after perhaps many years of endeavour, one lifts, one raises, one's purified, one's concentrated, one's elevated and sublime mind, in which all the energies of one's whole psycho-spiritual personality or being in here, one lifts that mind to the contemplation of Reality itself, and this is the Path of Regular Steps.

Here, on the Path of **Regular** Steps, progress is systematic. One consolidates an earlier stage of the Path before proceeding to the next, or to a later, stage. But in the Path of **Irregular** Steps one does not do this. In the Path of Irregular Steps, what happens is one starts off with a more or less mental, a more or less theoretical, idea of Buddhism, a mental idea of the Path, and a confused and incomplete idea at that, and **then** one starts practising, usually, I am afraid, in the West, without a teacher. And one doesn't start practising the teachings which correspond to the stage of development which one has actually reached, because usually one doesn't know that anyway; one starts practising what **appeals** to one, mentally, starts practising, perhaps, what flatters one's vanity. One might, for instance, start practising the Perfection of Wisdom. Now even for an absolute beginner to practise the Perfection of Wisdom is not absolutely impossible. After all, the **seed** of Buddhahood is there, however deeply hidden. Deep down, there **is** an affinity with the Perfection of Wisdom, so it is **not** absolutely impossible even for the beginner on the basis of a **purely** theoretical understanding of the subject to start practising the Perfection of Wisdom, and such a person may **even** succeed, to a very slight extent; by sheer force, as it were, of the egoistic will, one may succeed in holding oneself, just for an instant, at a level of concentration where one gets a glimpse even of the Perfection of Wisdom, even of the Void. But one will not be able to keep it up. One will sink, one will fall, and there will even be a reaction, a reaction from the being and consciousness as a whole which is simply not at that level, which is not ready to practise the Perfection of Wisdom. So one has to go back, one has to practise meditation, one has to develop higher states of consciousness, one has to create in this way a firm basis for the practise of the Perfection of Wisdom, and having done that in this way, one can then go forward again. We may say that following the Path of Irregular Steps usually involves forcing the pace, forcing the process, of spiritual development. It's rather like trying to make a plant grow by forcibly opening the tiny buds with one's fingers, or it's like trying to put on the upper storey of the house before the foundation is really complete, and sooner or later we discover that it cannot be done. It's no use forcibly opening the buds. One has to water the roots. It's no use trying to put on the roof. One has to strengthen the foundation. And as Buddhists, the flower that **we** want to see blooming is the thousand-petalled lotus itself. So plenty of water is needed. And the tower that we want to build is the tower that reaches up into the very heavens, so a very firm foundation is needed. And to state the matter axiomatically, we may say that a higher stage of the Path cannot be developed in its fullness, or even to a moderate extent, **before** a lower stage of the Path has been developed in its fullness. This is the basic principle, the basic precept.

So that if we want to experience the higher stage, the higher level, with any degree of intensity, with any **permanence**, we must first perfect the lower stage, on the basis of which alone the higher stage is to be established. And this is why, sooner or later, we have to make the transition from the Path of Irregular Steps to the Path of Regular Steps. And this, in fact, is what that transition itself means. It means going back in order to go forward.

Now at the beginning of this lecture I said that in the course of the last eight years the whole character of Buddhism in England had radically changed, and I think we can now begin to see in what that change consists. It consists essentially in a transition from the Path of Irregular Steps to the Path of Regular Steps, because more and more English Buddhists are beginning to realise that shallow, superficial approaches to the Dharma are not enough: are beginning to realise that irregular, unsystematic, improperly based, practice of the Path is not enough, have begun to realise that we have to go back to the beginning, back almost to the spiritual kindergarten, and start learning our spiritual A B C, in other words, have to start following the Path of regular steps.

But the question arises - How far back do we have to go? How far back? One could say, 'Back to morality' - that's quite a popular slogan nowadays. One could say, 'Back to the Hinayana'. After all, Buddhism is thought of, historically and spiritually, as consisting in three successive phases of unfoldment - Hinayana, Mahayana, Vajrayana - some would say back to the good old Hinayana, back to a bit of basic Theravada. But one may say that we have to go back **even further than that**, even further than that. We have to go back to something **even** more basic, **even** more fundamental than morality, **even** more basic, **even** more fundamental than the Hinayana, than the Theravada; something which has not yet been mentioned tonight, and something the absence of which you've perhaps not even noticed! We have to go back to **The Three Jewels**. We have, as it were, to go down on our knees, and we have to Go for Refuge saying,

Buddham saranam gacchami, Dhammam saranam gacchami, Sangham saranam gacchami:
To the Buddha for Refuge I go; to the Dharma for Refuge I go; to the Sangha for Refuge I go.

This is where Buddhism really begins. This, we may say, is the root, this is the foundation, this is the absolute bedrock of our spiritual life; this is how we really start practising the Path - by Going for Refuge.

This is how we make the transition, begin to make the transition, from the Path of Irregular Steps to the Path of Regular Steps: by Going for Refuge, by committing ourselves, to adopt the current idiom, committing ourselves to the Buddha - that is to say, committing ourselves to the Ideal of Enlightenment, of enlightened humanity; making that our ideal, that the aim and object of our lives, to become enlightened even as the Buddha was enlightened. Committing ourselves to this - Going for Refuge to the Buddha. And then to the Dharma - committing ourselves to the systematic, the wholehearted practice of the Path to Enlightenment, to the Unconditioned, to Nirvana. And thirdly and lastly, committing ourselves to the Sangha, the spiritual community, the spiritual fellowship of others who are also treading the Path, even as we are seeking to tread it.

A few minutes ago we saw the recent change in English Buddhism consists, so far as we can see, in the transition from the Path of Irregular Steps to the Path of Regular Steps. We saw that more and more English Buddhists are beginning to realise that shallow, superficial approaches to the Dharma are simply not enough, that irregular, unsystematic practice is not enough. Started realising that we have to go back to the beginning, and therefore because more and more people, more and more English Buddhists, are realising this, we find that more and more English Buddhists are Going for Refuge, are, thus, committing themselves.

Now at this stage I want to draw attention to a very important point; a very important fact, a fact in connection with which there has been and still is widespread misunderstanding and after that we must think of concluding.

If one Goes for Refuge, if one commits oneself to the Three Jewels, if, as an expression of one's determination to tread the Path of Regular Steps, one also undertakes to observe a greater or smaller number of moral Precepts, if one does all this openly and publicly, does it in a traditional ceremonial manner, then this Going for Refuge, this commitment, is what we also call ordination. Now usually we think, or we assume, that ordination means monastic ordination. We think it means becoming a monk, becoming a Bhikkhu, becoming a Gelong, becoming a Pungi, and so on, but this is a great mistake, and it's time, it's high time, that we corrected that mistake. There is of course such a thing as monastic ordination, but it's only one kind of ordination. The Sanskrit word for ordination is *Samvara*, literally meaning 'a binding' and therefore we speak of *Upasaka Samvara*, *Bhikkhu Samvara*, and even *Bodhisattva Samvara*. In other words we speak of lay ordination, monastic ordination, and even Bodhisattva ordination. But all three are ordinations; the same word *Samvara* is applied to each and every one of them. Upasaka, Bhikshu and Bodhisattva all equally Go for Refuge. The Upasaka Goes for Refuge; the Bhikshu Goes for Refuge, and the Bodhisattva, perhaps in a higher and deeper sense still, Goes for Refuge, all three commit themselves. Any difference between them is

simply as regards the number, and in the case of the Bodhisattva, the kind, of precepts observed. So that what the monk and the layman, the Bhikshu and the Upasaka, have in common is far more important than what they do not have in common. What they have in common is **The Three Jewels**. What they have in common is the Three Refuges; and nothing can be more important for the Buddhist than that. So that we find that the real line of demarcation is not between monks and laymen - using those English terms for the time being - the line of demarcation, properly speaking, is between those who have Gone for Refuge, and those who have not Gone for Refuge. And those who have Gone for Refuge, all those who have Gone for Refuge make up the Sangha, or the spiritual community in the ordinary sense of that term. That is, leaving aside the spiritual community of the great saints, Arahants, Bodhisattvas, and so on. The spiritual community in the ordinary sense, here on this earth. And any distinction that there may be between the monk on the one hand and the layman on the other, is a distinction within the Sangha; and we may even go so far as to say that this distinction of monk and lay within the Sangha probably owes more to social and cultural conditions in India during the time of the Buddha than to the intrinsic nature of the Dharma itself. And this distinction, we may further say, may or may not be relevant to the development of Buddhism in the West.

Unfortunately, unfortunately, the importance - the supreme, the overriding importance - of Going for Refuge is not always appreciated. Going for Refuge is only too often regarded as a rather ordinary sort of thing. A few years ago, I had in this connection a quite interesting experience. A young man came to see me one afternoon, and he said, 'I'm quite interested in Buddhism; I've read a few books, done a bit of meditation in the last few months but I don't really want to commit myself; I think I'm more interested in worldly life; I don't want to commit myself to Buddhism so could I just take the Refuges and Precepts? Would you please give them to me?', he said. So I had to explain that his request was self-contradictory; that Going for Refuge meant commitment. There was no point in taking the Refuges, in Going for Refuge, if you weren't going to commit yourself. That you couldn't do it. You could only mumble the words. But he couldn't understand this and he went away rather disappointed, rather dissatisfied, and I subsequently heard that he'd 'Gone for Refuge' with a more accommodating teacher and then continued with his worldly life.

Now this sort of misunderstanding is not peculiar to the West. In fact we may say it has spread to the West from the East. In the East, Buddhism has a very long history and it's a very glorious history. It's a history of which we can be really proud, for which we can be really thankful! No blood shed. Only this afternoon I was looking into a book, a volume of documents, about the history of Christianity in Western Europe, and it was my intention, originally, to buy that book, but after reading a few pages I was so sickened I decided I wouldn't buy it. It was such a dreadful record - the record of the Church. But in the case of Buddhism there's nothing like that, and that's something for which we can be very thankful indeed; of which we can be truly proud. We've got, in Buddhism, in two thousand five hundred years of Buddhism, great art, great religious literature, great systems of spiritual thought, and above all, great lives, but despite all that, despite all those two thousand five hundred very glorious years, it would be idle to pretend that Eastern Buddhism - especially nowadays - is perfect. In some areas serious degeneration has taken place, and we can see an instance of this in the matter of the 'Going for Refuge'. Originally, Going for Refuge represented a profound spiritual experience; you were moved to the very depths of your being, as we know when we read the scriptures and we read of people going for Refuge to the Buddha himself, in his own day: it's an experience of whole-hearted commitment to the spiritual life; to the Three Jewels: whole-hearted dedication, whole-hearted surrender. But nowadays this situation is rather different, and in many parts of the Buddhist East, unfortunately, the 'Going for Refuge', the whole concept, the whole experience, is greatly undervalued; it's not taken seriously at all. The Refuges, which are the absolute basis of Buddhism, in many parts of the Buddhist world, are just something you recite, in a dead language, on festive occasions: nothing more than that, and it's not very difficult to understand how this has come about. After all, in some parts of the East, the whole population considers itself Buddhist just as until recently the whole population of this country considered itself Christian. But a Buddhist, surely, if a Buddhist means **anything**, if Buddhist means anything, it means 'one who Goes for Refuge', so if you consider the whole population Buddhist, then presumably the whole population has gone for Refuge, the whole population is leading a vigorous spiritual life. But actually we don't find that. We find **that** signification of 'Going for Refuge' is lost, and a Buddhist in those parts of the East, the word 'Buddhist' in most parts of the East, doesn't really mean 'someone who goes for Refuge'; it's just a denominational label.

Now, in the East, what happens if someone **does** want to commit himself to spiritual life, to take Buddhism seriously, how do they do it? Inasmuch as the 'Going for Refuge' in so many parts of the Buddhist world has become debased, they don't think in terms of 'Going for Refuge', they think in terms of 'becoming monks', joining a monastery, putting on the yellow robe. So in some Buddhist

countries, therefore, we have a rather curious situation. We have, first, a large lay population which is on the whole only nominally Buddhist, nominally 'Going for Refuge', and, two, a comparatively small number of monks, who really are Buddhists, who really do go for Refuge, in the real sense. And what is the result of this? The result is, that the 'Going for Refuge', which is, as I have said, the basis of Buddhism, the most fundamental thing in Buddhism, is deprived of most of its significance; even deprived of **all** significance, and the **spiritual** life, the life of commitment, becomes identified, in many areas, with the monastic life. And, of course, monastic life itself is only too often, I am afraid, nominal. But we're not going into that now.

So, in the East, this sort of situation may be acceptable to some extent, because, after all, it is due to definite historical causes, definite historical factors, but in the West it is quite unacceptable. There's no reason whatever why we should perpetuate here, in the West, what is in fact a very serious distortion of Buddhism. But, unfortunately, visiting Buddhist teachers from the East only too often don't understand this, and they don't speak to us in terms of 'Going for Refuge', in fact, they hardly ever mention it. I remember when I was in the East - and I was twenty years in the East - I don't think even once, until I came in contact with Tibetan Buddhism, I don't think that even once anybody, any monk, any teacher, spoke to me of the importance of Going for Refuge. Only when I started coming in contact with the Tibetans. So, in this sort of way, most teachers who come from the East to this country don't mention Going for Refuge, even though that is the central act of the whole Buddhist life. If one shows any sign of genuine interest in Buddhism they want to make you a monk, sometimes, on the spot. They want to put you into a yellow robe, or into a black robe, as the case may be, and pack you off to the East. Because, for them, ordination means monastic ordination, but, as we've already seen, this is a great mistake. Ordination, essentially, means Going for Refuge, and Going for Refuge means ordination, commitment, consecration.

As Western Buddhists make the great transition from the Path of Irregular Steps to the Path of Regular Steps, as they start Going for Refuge, start becoming ordained, what, then, can we expect to see? We can expect to see not people busy donning robes of various colours, not people rushing off to the East; what we can expect to see is the creation, the growth, here in the West, of an Order. In other words, simply a community of people, ordinary people, who have committed themselves to the spiritual life; committed themselves to Buddhism; committed themselves to the Three Jewels: a community of people, who, individually, and in fellowship with one another, have Gone for Refuge. And, as some of you, at least, know, such a community, such an Order, is in fact already in existence, is in fact already more than six years old, and it is known as the Western Buddhist Order. We've called it 'Western' because it has arisen here in the West, under the conditions of a secularised, an industrialised, society. We call it 'Buddhist', because it derives its inspiration ultimately from the teachings and the example of Gautama the Buddha and of all the great enlightened saints and sages and spiritual masters who are his spiritual descendants, his spiritual sons and grandsons. And it is known as an 'Order' because it recognises the great value in the midst of a world so unsatisfactory and difficult in so many ways, and destructive in many ways, it recognises the value of a spiritual fellowship with one another, a spiritual fellowship in treading the Path. It's also an Order because it seeks to create a reservoir of spiritual energy from which all may draw, from which all may benefit. And it's an Order because above all, it realises the importance of the distinction upon which we've dwelt tonight - the distinction between the Path of Regular Steps and the Path of Irregular Steps.

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