Tape 121: What Meditation Really Is - Edited Version

In the course of the last few decades quite a number of changes have taken place in different parts of the world, particularly, perhaps, in the Western world. Political changes have taken place, as well as social changes, cultural changes, and also great technological changes. We might even go so far as to say that in the course of the last few decades more changes have taken place in the world, and in the Western world in particular, than during any comparable period in human history.

So far as human affairs, at least, are concerned, in the course of the last decade or more we have seen a constantly accelerating rate of change. More and more changes seem to be taking place, within shorter and ever shorter periods of time. Formerly, when the pace was slower, and you had time to `grow up', several generations might elapse before a change in some particular department of life started becoming noticeable. But this is no longer the case. Now these changes are noticeable in the course of a single lifetime, even in the space of a single decade - or half a decade. And we see this constantly accelerating rate of change in practically all fields of human life and human endeavour, whether political, social, economic, or cultural.

But in this lecture we are concerned with just one of those fields, which I shall call - to use a good, neutral, general term - the cultural field. In this particular field, one of the biggest, one of the greatest, and also potentially one of the most important changes to have taken place in recent years in with regard to the subject of meditation.

Fifteen or twenty years ago, meditation had hardly been heard of in the West. Whatever knowledge or interest there was, so far as meditation was concerned, was for the most part confined to obscure groups and eccentric individuals. But now we may say that the term meditation is almost a household word. Nevertheless, though the word is widely current, this does not mean that what the word represents - what meditation means - is at all well understood.

So many times I have heard people say, `Meditation means making the mind a blank - making the mind empty.' Others seem to think that meditation simply means sitting and doing nothing. Sitting and doing nothing may be a fine thing to do, or not to do, but it is not meditation. Again, sometimes you hear people say, or you even read, that meditation means sitting and gazing at your navel, possibly squinting as you do so, or that it means `going into some kind of trance'. (Unfortunately, one well-known and generally reliable writer on Buddhism has, to some extent, popularized this word `trance' as a synonym for meditation.) Other people think that meditation means just sitting quietly and thinking about things, `turning things over in one's mind'. Others again think that meditation means getting yourself into a sort of self-induced hypnotic state. These are just a few of the more popular and more widespread misunderstandings about meditation.

Why there should be these misunderstandings seems fairly obvious. Meditation is comparatively new in the West: at least it is new in the modern West. There has not been, at least in recent history, anything quite like it within the range of our experience. We do not even have the proper words, the proper specialized terms, to describe meditation states and meditation processes. It is only natural, therefore, that at first there should be some misunderstanding.

Again, we must remember that meditation is essentially something to be practised - that it is something which one does, or which one comes to experience. But most people still know about meditation only from hearsay. They do not know about it from their own personal practice and experience. They therefore rely on second-hand, third-hand, and even fourth-hand information. Some even rely - perhaps have to rely - for their information about meditation on books. Nowadays there are quite a few books on the market dealing, or purporting to deal, with meditation. But unfortunately, these books themselves are only too often based on hearsay, rather than on personal knowledge and experience. In some cases they may be based on pure imagination, not to say speculation. Already in this field there are quite a number of self-appointed experts. When something becomes popular, as meditation is becoming, only too many people are ready to cash in on the boom. I remember, in this connection, my own experience during the Buddha Jayanti year, the year in which the Buddhist world celebrated the 2500th anniversary of the Parinirvana, or passing away, of the Buddha - celebrated 2500 years of Buddhism. The Government of India sponsored the celebrations in India, while the different south-east Asian governments sponsored the celebrations in their own respective countries. A great deal of interest was aroused, and since there was a great demand for literature all sorts of people set to work writing books, pamphlets, and articles on Buddhism, in many cases without the slightest qualification.

There they were, all collecting material from here and there - sometimes from reliable, sometimes from unreliable sources - and by this means all producing another `work' on Buddhism.

In the West today there is a boom in spiritual things in general, and at least a modest boom in meditation. Quite a number of people are dissatisfied with their ordinary, everyday lives, their conventional way of living and doing things. People cannot accept a purely scientific explanation of life, despite the great practical success of science in dealing with the material world, while at the same time they find themselves unable to accept the traditional, mainly Judaeo-Christian, explanation of things either. They therefore begin looking for something which will satisfy them more deeply, more permanently, more creatively, and more constructively. Some people look in the direction of the Eastern spiritual traditions, and especially in the direction of meditation. They want to know about meditation, want to practise meditation - want to go along to meditation classes, attend meditation weekends - and in this way a demand for meditation is created.

Of course, only too many people are ready to fulfil that demand - in some cases for a consideration. Some of these people may be quite well qualified to meet the demand - quite well qualified to teach meditation - and others may not. In this way, too, all sorts of misunderstandings arise. Quite often meditation is identified with a particular kind of meditation, or with a particular concentration technique. It is not, perhaps, generally understood that there are many kinds of meditation - many methods - and many concentration techniques. Sometimes people who just know about one of these, or who practise just one, tend to identify the whole practice of meditation exclusively with that particular method, that particular technique. They may claim that their method is the best one, or even that it is the only one, and that you are not actually meditating at all unless you meditate in that particular way, using that particular technique. The other techniques, the other practices, the other traditions are, they claim, of no value. This is the sort of claim that is made. It becomes all the more important, therefore, to clear up the confusion, to resolve the misunderstandings. It becomes important to understand What Meditation Really Is. In order to do this we shall have to bear in mind the gap between the ideal and the real, between the Enlightened man, or Buddha, and the unenlightened, ordinary man. We shall have to bear in mind the nature of Buddhism itself.

As we saw in the previous lecture, the Buddha, or Enlightened man, represents a state, an attainment - a mode of being and consciousness - for which we have really no equivalent in Western thought, and for which we have, therefore, no equivalent word or term. `Buddha' does not mean God, the supreme being, the creator of the universe, nor does `Buddha' mean God incarnate. Neither does `Buddha' mean man, in the ordinary sense. Rather, we can best think of the Buddha, the Enlightened One, in evolutionary terms. Buddha, the Enlightened One, is a man. But he is a very special kind of man, a more developed man. In fact he is an infinitely developed man. That is to say, he is a man who has reached, and realized fully, the state of spiritual perfection that we call Enlightenment. This is what `Buddha' means. And Buddhism is whatever helps close the gap between the ideal and the real; whatever helps transform the unenlightened man into the Enlightened man; whatever helps us to grow, to evolve, to develop. When the real man becomes the ideal man - when the unenlightened man is transformed into the Enlightened man - a tremendous change takes place - perhaps the greatest human change and development that can take place. And it is this kind of development that we call the spiritual life, or the process of what is sometimes called the Higher Evolution. But what is it that changes? In what does this development consist?

Obviously it is not the physical body that changes, because physically the Enlightened man and the unenlightened man look very much alike. The change that takes place is a purely mental one - using the word mental in its widest sense. It is consciousness that develops, and this is the great difference, we may say, between the Higher Evolution, on the one hand, and the lower evolution on the other. What we call the lower evolution corresponds to the whole process of development from amoeba up to ordinary man, or unenlightened man. This is a predominantly biological process, a process that becomes psychological only towards the end. The Higher Evolution corresponds to the whole process - the whole course - of development which leads from unenlightened man up to Enlightened man, and this is purely a psychological and spiritual process, a process which may, eventually, become entirely dissociated from the physical body.

Now traditional Buddhism speaks in terms of four grades, or four levels, of consciousness, each one higher than the one preceding. First of all there is consciousness associated with the plane, or `world', of sensuous experience. Secondly there is consciousness associated with the plane, or `world', of mental and spiritual form - the plane or world of archetypes. Then there is consciousness associated with the formless plane or `world', and finally, consciousness associated with the Transcendental Path, which is to say, with the path leading directly to Nirvana, Enlightenment, or Buddhahood, as well as

with Nirvana, Enlightenment, or Buddhahood itself. There is another classification which we sometimes use, which may be more helpful. Here too there are four stages, or four levels, of consciousness, although they do not correspond very exactly to the four already enumerated. Here, first of all, comes what we call sense-consciousness, which is to say, consciousness associated with objects experienced through the physical senses. This is sometimes called simple consciousness, also animal consciousness. It is the consciousness we share with members of the animal kingdom. Secondly, there is self-consciousness: not self-consciousness in the more colloquial sense of the term, but self-consciousness in the sense of awareness of being aware, knowing that we know. This is sometimes called reflexive consciousness because, here, consciousness so to speak bends back upon itself, knows itself, experiences itself, is aware of itself. We may say, perhaps, that this self-consciousness, or reflexive consciousness, is human consciousness in the full sense of the term. Thirdly, there is what we call Transcendental Consciousness. This means consciousness of, or even direct personal contact with, Reality - Ultimate Reality - experienced as an object `out there'. Finally, there is Absolute Consciousness, in which the subject/object relation is entirely dissolved, and in which there is a full realization of Ultimate Reality, as transcending altogether the subject/object duality.

In both these classifications, the first consciousness enumerated is that, predominantly, of the ordinary unenlightened man, the man who is not even trying to develop spiritually. And the fourth consciousness, in both cases, is that of the Enlightened man.

We can now begin to see in what the spiritual life - in what the Higher Evolution - essentially consists. We may say that it consists in a continual progression from lower to higher, and ever higher, states of being and consciousness: from the world of sensuous experience to the world of mental and spiritual form, from the world of mental and spiritual form to the formless world, and from the formless world to Nirvana, or Enlightenment; or, from sense-consciousness to self-consciousness, self-consciousness to Transcendental Consciousness, Transcendental Consciousness to Absolute Consciousness.

We can now begin to see what meditation really is. Indeed, we shall see it all the more clearly for having gone a little way into these fundamentals first. There is, however, just one more point to be made. Spiritual life, as we have said, consists in the development of consciousness. And Buddhism, the Dharma, the teaching of the Buddha, is whatever helps in that development. But there are two different ways in which consciousness can be developed, or at least two different methods of approach. We call these methods the subjective and the objective, or the direct and the indirect. Having recognized this distinction, we are at last in a position to see what meditation really is. Meditation is the subjective or direct way of raising the level of consciousness. In meditation we raise the level of consciousness by working directly on the mind itself.

First of all, however, I must say something about `objective' or indirect methods of raising the level of consciousness. Some people appear to think that meditation is the only way there is to raise the level of consciousness, as if to say that consciousness must be raised directly by working on the mind itself or not at all. Such people therefore identify meditation with the spiritual life, and the spiritual life exclusively with meditation. They therefore claim that if you are not meditating you cannot possibly be leading a spiritual life. Sometimes they even identify the spiritual life with a particular kind of meditation, or a particular concentration technique. But this is far too narrow a view. It makes us forget what the spiritual life really is - which is to say that it consists in the raising of the level of consciousness - and it makes us forget, sometimes, what meditation itself really is. It is true, of course, that the raising of the level of consciousness by direct methods is at least as important as raising it by indirect methods; we might even say that it is perhaps more important. But we should not forget that other methods do exist; if we did forget this our approach would be too one-sided; and if we acted upon this, we would tend to make the spiritual life itself one-sided and even to exclude certain kinds of people - people of certain temperaments, for example - who were not, perhaps, particularly interested in meditation. So let us very briefly look at some of these indirect, non-meditative methods of raising the level of consciousness.

First of all there is change of environment. This is quite consciously employed as an indirect means of changing, and hopefully raising, our level of consciousness when we go away on retreat - perhaps into the country, to a retreat centre. There we spend a few days, or even a few weeks, simply in more pleasant, more congenial surroundings, perhaps not even doing anything in particular. This is often more helpful than people realize, and it suggests that the environment in which we normally have to live and work is not particularly good for us - does not help in the raising of the level of awareness. It really does seem as if, for most people, a positive change of environment leads quite naturally to a raising of their level of consciousness - even without any further effort.

Another quite practical and simple indirect method of raising the level of consciousness is what we call, in Buddhism, Right Livelihood. Practically everybody has to work for a living. Quite a lot of us do the same kind of work every day, five days a week, fifty weeks of the year. We may do it for five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, or thirty years, until we come to the age of retirement. All this has a continuous effect on our state of mind. If our work is unhealthy in the mental, moral, and spiritual sense, the effect on our minds will also be unhealthy. So therefore, in Buddhism, in the Buddha's teaching, we are advised very strongly to look at our means of livelihood and to practise Right Livelihood, which means earning our living in a way which does not lower our state of consciousness, which does not prevent us raising it, even, and which does no harm to other living beings. In Buddhist tradition there is a list of occupations which are seen not to be very helpful: the work of a butcher, of a trader in arms, of a dealer in liquor, and so on. By changing our means of livelihood (assuming that at present it is not quite right), then just that change of work, change of place, change of environment - that change in the sort of people we work with, the sort of thing that we have to do every day - will have a positive and helpful effect on our level of consciousness - or at least it will not prevent it from rising.

Then again, to become more specific and concrete, there is the leading of a regular and disciplined life: something which apparently is becoming less and less popular. This may consist in the observance and practice of certain moral precepts and principles, in having regular hours for meals, for work, for recreation, and for study, or in observing moderation in such things as eating, sleeping, and talking - perhaps even in fasting occasionally, or observing silence for a few days or weeks. In its fully developed form this more regular, disciplined life is what we call the monastic life. Among those who are leading such a regular, disciplined life, even without any meditation, over a period of years, one can see quite clearly a change taking place in their state, their level, of consciousness.

There are other indirect methods, such as Hatha Yoga or yoga in the more physical sense. Especially there are what are called yogic asanas, which affect not only the body, but the mind as well. They affect the mind through the body, and even people who meditate regularly sometimes find these asanas very helpful. Sometimes even the experienced meditator may be a bit too tired at the end of a day's work, or a bit too worried, to meditate properly. At such times he may practise a few asanas until his mind becomes calmer and more concentrated. Thus he loses his tiredness and becomes more refreshed, almost as though he had meditated.

Then again there are the various Japanese Do or `Ways' - like ikebana, flower arrangement. It might seem a very simple and ordinary thing, just to arrange a few flowers in a vase in a traditional way, but people who have engaged in this over a period of years are definitely changed in their minds, changed in their consciousness. One can also think of things like T'ai Chi Ch'uan and so on. These all have an effect upon the mind. They are all indirect ways of raising the level of consciousness. Likewise, the enjoyment of great works of art - of great poetry, music, and painting - often helps to raise the level of consciousness. Such enjoyment raises it if the works in question are truly great - if they really do issue from a higher state of consciousness in the artist himself - if they actually are an expression of a higher state of consciousness than we usually experience.

On a more practical level, there is simply helping other people. We might devote ourselves to helping the sick, the destitute, and the mentally disturbed, as well as to visiting those in prison. We might do these things very willingly and cheerfully, disregarding our own comfort and convenience - might do them without any personal, selfish motive. This is what in the Hindu tradition is called Nishkama Karma Yoga, or the yoga of disinterested action. This too is an indirect means of raising our state of consciousness.

Then there is association with spiritually minded people, especially those who are more spiritually advanced than ourselves - if we are able to find them. Such association is regarded in some traditions, or by some teachers, as the most important of all the indirect methods. It is what is referred to again and again in Indian religious and spiritual literature as Satsangh. Sat means true, real, authentic, genuine, spiritual - even Transcendental - while sangh means association, or communion, or fellowship. Satsangh is simply a getting together - often in a very happy, carefree spirit - with people who are on the spiritual path and whose predominant interest is in spiritual things. This rubs off on oneself, almost without any effort on one's own part. Thus Satsangh too is an indirect means of raising the level of consciousness. It is what in Buddhism we call Kalyana Mitrata.

Then again, there is chanting and ritual worship. Ritual is very much looked down upon today, especially by the more intelligent, or perhaps I should say `intellectual'. But it is a time honoured method of raising the level of consciousness. Even if we simply offer a few flowers, or light a candle

and place it in front of an image or picture, all this has an effect upon the mind, and sometimes we are surprised to find how much effect it does have. We might read lots of books about the spiritual life, we might even have tried to meditate - might even have succeeded in meditating - but sometimes we find that the performance of a simple, but meaningful, symbolic ritual action helps us far more.

There are many more indirect methods that could be mentioned, and these methods can of course be combined with each other. Some of them can be combined with the direct method, with the practice of meditation. However, good though these indirect methods are, some of them at least cannot carry us very far. They cannot carry us up through all the levels of consciousness. But since in most cases it will be quite a while before we do pass on to the higher levels of consciousness, the indirect methods will be useful to us for a long time. However, if by means of such methods we do succeed in getting anywhere near those higher levels then, in order to progress further, we shall have to have greater and greater recourse to meditation. We shall have to start working directly on the mind itself.

Now how do we do this? In what does this direct working on the mind consist? So far I have been using only the very general term, `meditation', because this is the one which has gained currency in the West, or at least in the English-speaking countries. But this English word `meditation' does not correspond to any one Indian or Buddhist term. What we call meditation in English corresponds to at least three rather different things, covers in fact three different ways of working directly on the mind - three different stages, even, in the development of consciousness - and for all these three things, Buddhism, like other Indian spiritual traditions, has quite separate terms. In plain English `meditation' comprises Concentration, Absorption, and Insight.

The stage of Concentration

Concentration is of a twofold nature, involving both a narrowing of the focus of attention and a unification of energy. As such, concentration can be spoken of as integration, which is of two kinds, the `horizontal' and the `vertical' as I shall call them. Horizontal integration means the integration of the ordinary waking consciousness within itself, or on its own level, while vertical integration means the integration of the conscious mind with the subconscious mind, a process which involves the freeing of blocked somatic energy as well as the tapping of deeper and ever deeper energies within the psyche.

Horizontal integration corresponds to what is generally known as mindfulness and recollection. This English word `recollection' is rather a good one, because it means just what it says - re-collection. It is a collecting together of what has been scattered, and what has been scattered is ourselves, our conscious selves, or so-called conscious selves. We have become divided into a number of selves, or part-selves, each with its own interests, its own desires, and so on, each trying to go its own way. At one time one self is uppermost, at another time another, so that sometimes we hardly know who we are. There is a dutiful self and there is a disobedient self. There is a self that would like to run away from it all, and there is a self that would like to stay at home and be a good boy, and so on. We hardly know, very often, which of these selves we really and truly are. Each of them is our self, and yet none of them is our self. The truth is that we do not really have a self at all. It has not yet come into existence. It has not yet been born. The self - the overall self, as it were - comes into existence only with the practice of mindfulness and recollection, when we `collect' all these selves together.

Mindfulness, or recollection, in Buddhist tradition is of three kinds. Firstly, there is mindfulness of the body and its movements: knowing exactly where the body is and what it is doing. Here we make no unmindful movements, no movements of which we are unaware. When we speak, too, we are mindful, knowing what what we are saying and why we are saying it. We are fully alert, composed, aware. Secondly, there is mindfulness of feelings and emotions. We become quite clearly conscious of our passing, changing moods, of whether we are sad or happy, pleased or displeased, anxious, afraid, joyful, or excited. We watch, we see it all, we know exactly how we are. Of course this does not mean standing back from our feelings and emotions like a sort of spectator, looking at them in a very external, alienated way. It means experiencing our feelings and emotions - being `with' them, not cut off from them - but at the same time being always mindful of them and observing them. Thirdly and lastly, there is mindfulness of thoughts: knowing just what we are thinking, just where our mind actually is from instant to instant. As we know, the mind wanders very easily. We are usually in an unconcentrated, unrecollected state as regards our thoughts. For this reason we have to practise being mindful of our thoughts, aware of what we are thinking from moment to moment.

If we practise in this way, then horizontal integration is achieved. We are brought together, and a self is created. When this is properly and perfectly done, we develop complete self-consciousness: we

become truly human. But concentration is not only horizontal; it is also vertical. The conscious mind must now be integrated with the subconscious mind. This is achieved by having recourse to an object of concentration - an object on which one learns to concentrate one's whole attention, and into which the energies of the subconscious are allowed to be gradually absorbed.

At this point, the meditator, or the would-be meditator, having achieved horizontal integration, has reached a very crucial stage. He is about to make a very important transition, from the plane or world of sensuous experience to the plane or world of mental and spiritual form. But he is held back by what are known as the five mental hindrances, which have to be suppressed before the stage of Absorption can be entered upon. (This suppression is temporary. The five mental hindrances are permanently eradicated only when Insight has been attained.) First of all, there is the hindrance of desire for sensuous experience through the five physical senses, desire, that is, for agreeable visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile sensations - especially those connected with food and with sex. So long as desires of this sort are present in the mind, no transition to the stage of Absorption is possible, since while they are present the meditator cannot really occupy himself with the concentration-object. Secondly, there is the hindrance of hatred, which is the feeling of ill will and resentment that arises when the desire for sensuous experience is frustrated - a feeling that is sometimes directed towards the object of the desire itself. Thirdly comes the hindrance of sloth-and-torpor, which keeps one on the plane of sensuous desire, on the ordinary, everyday level of consciousness. It is a sort of animal-like stagnation, both mental and physical. Fourthly, there is the opposite hindrance to sloth-and-torpor, the hindrance of restlessness-and-worry. This is the inability to settle down to anything for very long. It is a state of continual fussing and bothering, never really getting anything done. Fifthly and lastly, there is the hindrance of doubt - not a sort of honest intellectual doubt, but something more like indecision, or even unwillingness to make up one's mind, to commit oneself. Basically, it is a lack of faith, a lack of trust: a reluctance to acknowledge that there is a higher state of consciousness for man to achieve. These, then, are the five mental hindrances which must be allowed to subside, or which must even be suppressed, before we take up the concentration-object and prepare to enter upon the stage of Absorption.

For a mind obscured by the five mental hindrances, as our minds so often are, there are five traditional similes, in each of which the mind itself is likened to water. The mind which is contaminated by desire for sensuous experience is likened to water in which various bright colours have been mixed. It is pretty, perhaps, but the purity and translucency of the water has been lost. The mind which is contaminated by hatred is, we are told, like water that has been brought to the boil, which is hissing and bubbling and seething. The mind contaminated by sloth-and-topor is said to be like water choked with a thick growth of weeds, so that nothing can get through it. The mind contaminated by restlessness-and-worry is like water which has been whipped up into waves by the wind, even by a great storm. Lastly, the mind which is contaminated by doubt, by uncertainty, is like water full of mud. When the five hindrances are suppressed, the conscious mind becomes like pure water. It becomes cool, it becomes calm and clear. It is now ready to take up an object of concentration.

These objects of concentration, even in the Buddhist tradition alone, are of very many kinds. Some are rather ordinary and everyday, while others are rather extraordinary. First of all there is the breath, our own breath, as it comes in and goes out. There are various forms of this practice, several different techniques. Another object of concentration, a very important one, is sound, especially the sacred sound that we call mantra. Or we can take as an object of concentration a disc of very pure, bright colour, red or blue or green, etc., according to temperament. Again, we can make our object of concentration a piece of human bone, preferably a sizeable piece to provide a good solid object of concentration. Alternatively we can take an idea, take a concept of a particular virtue to be cultivated, such as generosity. And again - to take something quite ordinary and mundane - we can concentrate on the flame of a lamp, or on a candle. We can also concentrate on the various psychic centres within our own body, or on a mental image or picture of the Buddha, or of a great Bodhisattva or teacher. In all of these objects, whether the breath, the sound, the mantra, the flame, the image or picture of the Buddha, etc., the mind can become absorbed, even deeply absorbed.

We do not have to practise concentration with each and every one of these objects, though it is possible for several different concentration-objects to be combined in sequence in one particular system or tradition of meditation practice. The different objects of concentration can also be combined with some of the indirect methods of raising the level of consciousness, particularly for example with chanting and with ritual.

Now if we proceed in this manner, that is to say, if we integrate the conscious mind with itself; if we integrate the conscious mind with the subconscious mind; if we suppress the five mental hindrances; if

we take up an object or objects of concentration, and if our deeper energies start flowing more and more powerfully into the object of concentration, then a great change will take place: our level of consciousness definitely will start rising, from the plane or world of sensuous experience to the plane or world of mental and spiritual form. In other words, we begin to pass from the first to the second stage of meditation, from meditation in the sense of concentration, to meditation in the sense of absorption.

The Stage of Absorption

Absorption, the second level of meditation, is generally divided into four levels, and throughout these four levels the process of vertical integration, begun at the stage of Concentration, continues. Here, it has to be noted, there is no question of integrating the conscious and the subconscious mind, for that has already been done. Here the purified, integrated conscious mind is itself integrated with the superconscious. And the energies of the superconscious - energies, that is to say, which are purely spiritual - begin to be tapped. Absorption represents, therefore, the unification of the mind on higher and ever higher levels of consciousness and being. As this process continues, our cruder mental states and cruder mental functions are progressively refined and our energies are absorbed into higher states and higher functions.

In what we call the first level of absorption there is a certain amount of mental activity present. We are still thinking about this and that, thinking, perhaps, subtle thoughts about worldly matters, or even thinking about our meditation practice itself. From the second level of absorption onwards, mental activity of this kind is entirely absent. Thinking as we know it entirely disappears. One might expect that because we are not thinking we should become dead and inert, but this would be a great mistake. We might even say that because we are not thinking, consciousness becomes clearer, brighter, more intense, more radiant than ever. But since thinking does not occur at the second and higher levels, it is important not to think about these levels of absorption too much, or preferably not at all. Instead, we should try to get some feeling of what they are like, proceeding not analytically, not intellectually, but with the help of images, symbols, and similes. We can best do this with the help of the four traditional similes for the four states of absorption - similes which go back to the Buddha's own personal teaching.

The simile for the first level of absorption is that of the soap powder and the water. The Buddha asks us to imagine that a bath-attendant takes some soap powder in one hand - apparently they had soap powder in ancient India - and some water in the other. He mixes the two together in a platter in such a way that all the water is fully absorbed by the soap powder, and all the soap powder thoroughly saturated by the water. There is not a single speck of soap powder unsaturated, and not a single drop of water left over. The first stage of absorption, the Buddha says, is just like that. In it, the entire psycho-physical organism is completely saturated with feelings of bliss, of ecstasy, of supreme happiness, and these feelings are all contained. At the same time, the whole being is saturated - there is no part of the being, physical or mental, unsaturated - and yet there is nothing left over. Thus there is no inequality, no imbalance. It is all calm, and steady, and stable, and firm: all naturally concentrated.

Describing the second level of absorption, the Buddha asks us to imagine a great lake of water, very pure, very calm and still. This lake is fed by a subterranean spring, so that all the time in the very heart of the lake there is a bubbling up of pure water from a very great depth. The second level of absorption is like this. It is calm and it is clear, it is peaceful, pure, translucent, but, from an even greater depth there is something even more pure, even more bright, even more wonderful, bubbling up all the time. This `something' is the higher spiritual element, the higher spiritual consciousness, by which we are now as it were infiltrated - by which we are inspired.

The third level of absorption, the Buddha says, is like the same lake, the same body of water, only with lotus blossoms growing in it. These lotus blossoms are standing right in the water, are soaked and pervaded by it. They are thoroughly enjoying the water, you could say. Similarly, in the third level of absorption, we are, so to speak, bathing in that higher spiritual element, that higher spiritual consciousness - bathing in it and soaking in it - permeated by it within and surrounded by it without. This, the Buddha said, is what the third level of absorption is like.

In the case of the fourth and last level of absorption, the Buddha asks us to imagine a man who, on a very hot day, has a bath in a beautiful great tank of water. Having washed himself clean, he comes out, and then wraps his whole body in a sparklingly white, clean, new sheet - what Indians call a dhoti - so that he is swathed in it, and it completely covers and cloaks him. The fourth level of absorption, the Buddha says, is like that. We are insulated by that higher spiritual consciousness from the contact, and

from the influence, of those states and levels which are lower. It is as though we were surrounded by a powerful aura. It is not that we immerse ourselves in that state, but rather that the state has descended into us, permeated us. Furthermore, it has started radiating outwards from us so that we have a sort of aura of meditation extending from us in all directions. In this state we cannot be easily influenced or easily affected, although we can easily influence and affect other people.

These, then, are the four levels of absorption. If we want to recall them, and get the feeling of them, perhaps we should just recollect the four beautiful similes given by the Buddha to illustrate them. Having traversed, at least in imagination, these four levels of absorption, we can now come on to the third and last stage of meditation.

The Stage of Insight

By Insight we mean the clear vision, the clear perception, of the true nature of things - of what in traditional Buddhist terminology is called things `as they really are'. In other words, to use more abstract, more philosophical phraseology, it is a direct perception of Reality itself. This is what meditation at its height is - this is what Insight, or sight, really is. Such perception is twofold. It is insight into the conditioned, which is to say, the `world', or whatever is mundane, transitory, and so on; and it is insight into the Unconditioned, that which transcends the world: the Absolute, the Ultimate.

The former, which is to say insight into the conditioned, consists in three things, or has three aspects. We see first of all that conditioned things, worldly things, by their very nature cannot give permanent and lasting satisfaction. For that we have to look elsewhere. Secondly, we see that all conditioned things are impermanent. We cannot possess any of them for ever. And thirdly and lastly, we see that all conditioned things are only relatively existent. They are not absolutely existent. They do not possess permanent, ultimate reality.

Now insight into the Unconditioned consists, in one formulation, of what are known as the Five Knowledges, or the Five Wisdoms. This is not knowledge in the ordinary sense, but something far beyond that. First of all there is what we can only describe as the knowledge of the totality of things, not so much in their aggregated particularity, but in and through their ultimate depths and spiritual essence - in the light of their common unifying principle. Then there is the knowledge of all things, conditioned and Unconditioned, without the slightest trace of subjective distortion. This knowledge is sometimes called the Mirror-like Knowledge. It is so called because it is like a great mirror which reflects everything just as it is - without subjectivity, or prejudice, or dimming, or clouding, or obscuration. In it everything is seen just as it is. Thirdly, there is the knowledge of things in their absolute sameness and identity - seeing everywhere one mind, one reality, one Sunyata. Fourthly, there is the knowledge of things in their difference. The absolute unity does not wipe out the absolute difference. There is no one-sidedness. We see things in their absolute unity, but we also see them in their absolute multiplicity - their absolute uniqueness. We see them in both ways at once. And then, finally, there is the knowledge of what is to be done for the spiritual welfare of other living beings.

These Five Knowledges, or Five Wisdoms, are symbolized in Buddhist iconography by what we call the Mandala of the Five Buddhas. Visualizing this Mandala, we see first of all a vast expanse of blue sky, very deep and very brilliant. At the Centre of this expanse we see appearing a pure white Buddha figure, holding in his hand a brilliant golden wheel. Then in the East we see a deep, dark blue Buddha holding in his hand a `diamond sceptre'. In the South we see a golden yellow Buddha holding in his hand a brilliantly shining jewel. In the West we see a deep red Buddha holding in his hand a red lotus. And in the North we see a green Buddha, holding two `diamond sceptres' crossed.

When all the Five Knowledges dawn, Enlightenment has been attained. We become, ourself, the embodiment of all five Buddhas. At this stage Insight has been fully developed, meditation has been practised to the very limit, and we have understood for ourselves what meditation really is.