

## **Tape 122: the Meaning of Spiritual Community - Edited Version**

In the first of these three lectures I dealt with a very lofty subject, with nothing less than the Ideal of Human Enlightenment itself. In the second lecture I dealt, in part at least, with quite advanced, quite sublime, spiritual experiences, such as might not come to everybody - at least not for a while. But in this lecture I'm going to deal with something very down to earth, something that could be of personal and practical significance for anyone: The Meaning of Spiritual Community. I shall deal with the subject under three main headings: Who are the members of the Spiritual Community? Where is the Spiritual Community to be found? And, What do the members of the Spiritual Community do - for themselves, for one another, and even for the world?

However, before taking up the first of these questions, I would like to resolve a possible misunderstanding about the word 'spiritual'. We speak of the spiritual community, the spiritual life, the spiritual ideal, and spiritual practice; but the question arises, what do we mean by the word 'spiritual'? It is a word that we very often use, perhaps in quite a number of different senses. Sometimes people use the word rather loosely, and sometimes, I am afraid, people use it in no sense at all, but rather to disguise general poverty of thought, or to convey a vague sense of uplift. It is therefore important that we clarify the meaning of this word.

In my own usage of the term, as you will have seen from these lectures, the 'spiritual' is to be contrasted with the 'psychological', as well as with what I call the 'worldly'. By 'psychological' I mean consisting of, or pertaining to, mental states, including mental processes or functions, in general; and by 'spiritual' I mean consisting of, or pertaining to, what are called skilful mental states.

Now this in turn raises the question of what is meant by the word skilful. After all, this is a term that we come across again and again in Buddhist literature. In fact, this word 'skilful', with its antonym 'unskilful', is one of the most important terms in the whole range of Buddhist psychology and ethics. Unskilful means consisting of, or associated with, craving, aversion, and delusion, while skilful, on the contrary, means consisting of, or associated with, the absence of these states, that is to say, with the absence of craving, aversion, and delusion. Putting it more positively, skilful mental states are those associated with content (one might almost say peace of mind), friendliness, and knowledge - in the sense of wisdom.

You may have noticed that Buddhist literature does not speak in terms of good and evil. It does not use terms like sin, or vice, or virtue - at least not in their Christian sense. When it is speaking precisely and accurately - speaking as it were philosophically - in its own distinctive language, it speaks in terms of what is skilful and what is unskilful. Such usage suggests quite a number of things. It suggests, for instance, that good intentions or good feelings are not enough. It suggests that what we call the 'good' life must include an element of knowledge, of understanding. We therefore find that, in Buddhist literature, there is no such thing as the 'holy fool', which is to say, someone who is good, even very good, but stupid. For Buddhism this would be a contradiction in terms. The Buddhist usage of the term skilful also suggests that by being unskilful we get ourselves into difficulties - even incur inconvenience, not to say suffering - just as if we handle a knife or chisel clumsily, then sooner or later we are bound to cut ourselves.

The three English words craving, aversion, and delusion, do render quite faithfully and accurately, indeed almost literally, the three corresponding terms in the original languages, Sanskrit and Pali, but perhaps they do not give us much real insight into the meaning of those terms. A Tibetan source, however, gives a more extended and detailed account. According to this source, craving is 'longing desire to possess objects of sensuous cognition which you like, and to include them in your ego-identity, in the hope of getting a sense of security from 'having them as part of you'.' Aversion is defined as 'fearful and angered repulsion to get rid of objects of sensuous cognition which you dislike, and to exclude them from your ego-identity, in the hope of getting a sense of security from 'not having them as part of you'.' As you can see from these definitions, one is the opposite of the other. Finally, delusion, which is defined as 'a stubborn closed-mindedness about learning anything which you feel might threaten your ego-identity, and upset the sense of security you wish to get from it, but which you are unaware of, and therefore feel you must protect'. Even though comparatively short, these three definitions are quite profound and far-reaching.

With the help of these three definitions we can begin to see what is meant by Spiritual Community. By Spiritual Community we mean a community which encourages the development in its members of skilful, rather than unskilful, mental states as being the best ideal for human beings. In the same way, the spiritual life is a life devoted to the elimination of unskilful, and to the development of skilful, mental states. In a higher sense, it is a life which is entirely based upon, and expressive of, the skilful mental states of contentment or peace of mind, friendliness, and wisdom. Spiritual practice, it follows, is therefore any

observance, any method or exercise, which is conducive to the eradication of unskilful, and to the development of skilful, mental states.

The distinction between skilful and unskilful mental states can serve as a basis for distinguishing between different levels of experience. Firstly, there is a level of consciousness on which only unskilful mental states are present, secondly, there is a level of consciousness on which only skilful mental states are present, and thirdly, there is a level of consciousness which is just mixed. Further, these three levels of consciousness can be seen to correspond with three planes of existence. Arranging them in a slightly different way, in an ascending order, we get, first of all, what we may call the worldly plane. This is a plane of existence on which people are motivated entirely, or almost entirely, by the unskilful thoughts of craving, aversion, and delusion. It is a 'state' in which they perform unskilful acts, which is to say: they harm other living beings, take what has not been given, and indulge in sexual misconduct. They also speak unskilful words: words which are untrue or false, which are harsh and malicious, which create dissension, and which are idle, frivolous, and useless. This, then, is the worldly plane, or plane of worldly life. We could simply call it the world.

The mixed plane is a plane of struggle, of effort and contest. It is a plane on which skilful and unskilful states are fairly evenly balanced. It is the plane where we find those who have just started to lead a spiritual life, who have just started trying to evolve. Just as an amphibian is a creature which lives partly in the water and partly on dry land, so the person dwelling on this mixed plane is spiritually amphibious. Sometimes such a person is very worldly, but at other times he might be quite spiritual.

Thirdly, there is the spiritual plane. This is the plane on which people are motivated entirely, or almost entirely, by skilful mental states: motivated by contentment, love, and knowledge; motivated by mindfulness, energy, faith, joy, compassion, and so on. It is the plane on which they perform actions that are helpful, generous, and pure, where they speak words that are true, that are affectionate, that promote concord and harmony, and that conduce to the good of the hearer.

As you will have seen in the previous lecture, Buddhism speaks in terms of four levels of consciousness: consciousness associated with the plane of sensuous experience, consciousness associated with the plane of mental and spiritual form, consciousness associated with the formless plane, and, finally, consciousness associated with the Transcendental Path and with Nirvana. What I am here calling the world therefore corresponds with the plane of sensuous experience, and what I am here calling the spiritual plane corresponds with the plane of mental and spiritual form, together with the formless plane. Sometimes the word 'spiritual' is used in such a way as to include the Transcendental as well, but my own preference is to make quite a sharp distinction between the spiritual and the Transcendental.

It is perhaps worth noting here that the spiritual plane corresponds to meditation in the sense of absorption. It therefore follows that the meditation experience is best seen as being an uninterrupted flow of skilful mental states, without any unskilful thought intruding. This is what meditation essentially is, and this is quite a useful way of looking at it, since it makes it clear that meditation does not necessarily mean sitting in meditation. Meditation, essentially, is simply this flow of spiritual thoughts - whether we are sitting, walking, standing, or doing anything else.

If living in the world means being motivated by unskilful thoughts, speaking unskilful words, and performing unskilful actions, and if the spiritual life consists in the progressive eradication of unskilful, and the development of skilful, mental states - consists eventually in being entirely motivated by such states - then the more we lead a spiritual life the less we will tend to live in the world. This separation, this leaving the world behind, may be only mental, but it may be physical as well. People sometimes say that it is enough to give something up mentally, and that to do it physically and verbally is not so important. Usually, however, we do not really know whether or not we have given something up unless we try to do it literally. In Buddhism the literal giving up of the world is traditionally known as 'the going forth from home into the homeless life'. Essentially, it consists in giving up worldly attitudes, giving up unskilful mental states. But it is not easy to do this, especially if the people all around you are freely indulging in such states and giving expression to them in the form of unskilful words and unskilful deeds, and even expecting you to join in. In this way a great deal of strain and tension arises, even a great deal of conflict. You are trying to do one thing, they are trying to do another. You are trying to develop skilful thoughts, they are giving way to unskilful thoughts. One day - or one night - you decide that you cannot stand the strain any longer. You just want to be free: free from that struggle, that conflict. You want to be free to stand on your own feet, free to develop in your own way, skilfully. So you just give up everything. You just walk out. You go forth.

We have, in the Buddhist tradition, a classic example of this Going Forth in the story of the Buddha himself - or rather of the future Buddha, the Buddha-to-be. If you know, at least in outline, the story of the Buddha, you will know that Siddhartha, as he then was, was born into the proud and warlike Shakya tribe. Coming from a wealthy and aristocratic family, he was in the position of being able to satisfy whatever desires he had. Whether health, youth, strength, riches, social position, or education, he had everything that the world could offer. He had plenty of leisure, plenty of friends and relations; he had a wife and a child. But although he had all these things, they could not give him what he really wanted. For even though he may not have known it at this stage, what he really wanted was something spiritual, something Transcendental. He consequently felt worldly life to be increasingly oppressive, increasingly stuffy, and, one day, he decided to leave it all.

He waited until nightfall, until everybody was asleep, and then rode out into the night on his favourite horse, leaving behind his palace, leaving his home, accompanied, we are told, by a single faithful servant, who ran along at the heels of the horse. He rode until dawn broke, when he found himself on the bank of a river which marked the boundary of his father's territory. He then dismounted, cut off his hair and beard with his sword, and then changed clothes with a beggar who happened to be passing by. Finally, he sent the horse and the servant home, and went on his way alone. This is known as the 'Going Forth' of Siddhartha, who became the Buddha. It is also known as the 'Great Renunciation', and for Buddhists it is the classic example of Going Forth - of Going Forth not just mentally but literally, with body, speech, and mind. One could even say that the Buddha's Going Forth is the archetypal Going Forth. After all, it is not only Siddhartha who has Gone Forth. Many people have Gone Forth, not just in the Buddha's day but in all ages of history; not just in the past, but also in the present. Perhaps, by virtue of the fact that you are listening to this lecture, you too have Gone Forth - not literally perhaps, but certainly mentally to some extent: Gone Forth from at least some worldly attitudes, from conventional ways of thinking, and from collective attitudes of various kinds.

But what happens when we have Gone Forth? Very often, of course, nothing happens. Very often we just continue to Go Forth, indefinitely as it were, and remain on our own. If we are 'lucky', however, something does happen: we start to meet others who have Gone Forth in the same sort of way as ourselves. Moreover, we meet not only people who have 'gone forth' from but people who have 'gone forth' to: people who are committed to the spiritual, committed, even, to the Transcendental. In other words, we have come in contact with the Spiritual Community.

You may be thinking by now that it has taken us a long time to get around to the Spiritual Community! But this is, in fact, what very often happens. Siddhartha himself, the future Buddha, never came in contact with the Spiritual Community - not, at least, during his period of Going Forth. He had to establish one after his Enlightenment. But we are much more fortunate. We do have the opportunity of coming into contact with the Spiritual Community. What is it, then, that we come into contact with?

Who are the members of the Spiritual Community?

In brief, we may say that the members of the Spiritual Community are individuals who have gone for Refuge. They are individuals who have committed themselves to what are known as 'The Three Jewels'. Before saying more about the Three Jewels, however, I would like first of all to draw attention to this word 'individual'. In consisting of individuals, the Spiritual Community consists of people who have made an individual choice and an individual decision. They have accepted responsibility for their own lives, and have decided that they want to develop as human beings, want to grow. The Spiritual Community is not, therefore, a group in the ordinary sense. It is not something collective, with a collective mind or soul. It has no collective identity in which you lose your own, or in which you become submerged. The Spiritual Community is a voluntary association of free individuals who have come together on account of a common commitment to a common ideal: a commitment to what we call the Three Jewels.

The Three Jewels are, firstly, the Ideal of Human Enlightenment, secondly, the Path of the Higher Evolution - which is to say, the Path of successively higher levels of consciousness, from self-consciousness to Absolute Consciousness - and thirdly, the Spiritual Community itself. The Spiritual Community consists, therefore, of all those who, with the object of attaining Enlightenment, are devoting themselves to the development of skilful, rather than unskilful, mental states. In the highest sense, the third Jewel is what we call the Transcendental Community: it is that part of the Spiritual Community which has not only gone for Refuge, not only developed skilful mental states - not only become absorbed - but which has developed Insight: which sees, at least for a moment, Reality - face to face. Members of this 'community' have broken the first three fetters, as they are called, which bind man to conditioned existence. They are prepared to die in order that they may be spiritually reborn. Their practice of the Path

is wholehearted, and not merely conventional. Their commitment is absolute, without any reservations whatsoever.

In more traditional Buddhist language, the Three Jewels are known as the Buddha-Jewel, the Dharma-Jewel, and the Sangha-Jewel. They are called jewels because, until modern times, jewels were the most precious of all material things. So the Three Jewels represent, in the same way, what is spiritually most precious, spiritually most valuable, and spiritually most worthwhile. In short they represent the highest values of, and for, human existence.

In more concrete terms, the members of the Spiritual Community are all those who have been 'ordained' - to use the English word in a very provisional sense. They have committed themselves to the Three Jewels not just mentally, but fully and openly, with body and speech as well: they have committed themselves with their whole being. Further, that commitment has been acknowledged by existing members of the Spiritual Community, in particular by a senior member of the Community. They have also pledged themselves to the observance of certain moral precepts. Members of the Spiritual Community, in this sense, may be young or old, male or female, 'educated' or uneducated. They may be living at home with their family - living, that is to say, outwardly in the world - or they may have 'gone forth' in the literal sense. They may be lay brothers or lay sisters, as they are sometimes called, or they may be monks or nuns - to use rather un-Buddhistic expressions. They may be more, or less, spiritually advanced. But all have gone for Refuge, all are committed to the Three Jewels, and are therefore all, equally, members of the Spiritual Community.

Where is the Spiritual Community to be found?

The Spiritual Community is to be found wherever there are individuals who have gone for Refuge. Especially, it is found wherever such individuals are in personal contact, where they meet regularly. Of course, that contact is not simply social: it is spiritual, one might even say existential. Where members of the Spiritual Community live under the same roof they are known as a residential Spiritual Community. Residential spiritual communities can be of various kinds. For instance, they can be monastic - or semi-monastic - in character. (I do not particularly like the word 'monastic', which is not a very Buddhistic expression, but we do not seem to have a better one in the English language.) The monastic - or semi-monastic - residential spiritual community can be a community of men or a community of women. In either case, the members of the community live together under comparatively ideal conditions, often in a quiet, secluded place, and they devote themselves mainly to study, to meditation, and to productive work - the last usually taking a 'co-operative' form.

In some parts of the Buddhist world, the Spiritual Community has come to be identified exclusively with the monastic community - even with the monastic community in a rather formalistic sense. This, however, is a great mistake. The Spiritual Community consists of all those who have gone for Refuge.

What do the members of the Spiritual Community do - for themselves, for one another, and for the world?

Firstly, what do they do for themselves? Clearly, they carry on with their individual spiritual practice. They continue to study, they meditate, they practise Right Livelihood, they observe the precepts, and so on. But this is rather general. To explain, however, what members of the Spiritual Community do for themselves as members of the Spiritual Community, is very difficult, since it means describing, to some extent at least, what it is like to be a member of the Spiritual Community. It is possible to say one thing, however. A member of the Spiritual Community puts himself, or herself, in a position of being able to relate to others on a purely spiritual basis, or at least on a predominantly spiritual basis: on the basis of a common spiritual ideal, a common spiritual commitment.

Now what does this mean? We meet people all the time, whether at home, at a club, in a coffee bar, or wherever, and we relate to these people that we meet in a number of different ways. Usually, we relate on the basis of our own need - though the need may, of course, be mutual. Sometimes it is a sexual need, sometimes it is an economic need or a social need, but it is a need, and the relationship is therefore very often exploitive, even mutually exploitive. Of course, we do not usually care to admit this - do not care to say what it is that we really want from other people. Sometimes we do not even fully and consciously know what we are really looking for ourselves. This means that only too often our relationships are dishonest or, at best, confused. It means that they are accompanied by a certain amount of mutual misunderstanding, and a certain amount of rationalization.

Within the Spiritual Community, however, we do not relate to others in this kind of way. Within the Spiritual Community the situation is that we all want to develop spiritually. After all, we have all gone for

Refuge! We therefore relate on the basis of our common commitment and our common ideal - relate on the basis of our highest common interest, our highest common concern. If, moreover, we relate to others on this basis, then we experience others in a way in which we do not usually experience them. We experience them as spiritual beings. And because we experience others as spiritual beings - because we are relating to them as spiritual beings - we experience ourselves as spiritual beings too. In this way the pace of spiritual development is accelerated. We experience ourselves more and more truly, more and more intensely. Within the Spiritual Community, then, we can be ourselves as we are at our best and at our highest. Very often, when we speak of 'being ourselves', we mean being ourselves at our worst, letting out that part of ourselves that we do not usually like to acknowledge. But there is another way in which we can be ourselves, for, very often, it is the best in us, rather than the worst, that has no opportunity to express itself. So, within the context of the Spiritual Community, we can be ourselves at our best. If necessary, we can be ourselves at our 'worst' occasionally, but the important thing is that we can be ourselves fully, wholly, and perfectly.

To be ourselves in this way is rarely possible within the context of ordinary life, even with our 'nearest and dearest', whether parents, husbands or wives, or our closest friends. Only too often, on certain occasions, or in connection with certain topics, we cannot be fully ourselves - not even with one person. Indeed, quite a few people go through their lives without being able to be themselves completely and continuously with anyone. They consequently find it very difficult even to experience themselves as they are, even to experience themselves at their best.

Within the Spiritual Community, on the other hand, we can be ourselves, and not just with one person, but even with two or three people - even with many people. This sort of experience is, perhaps, unprecedented in the lives of the majority of people. Just imagine, for a moment, what it would be like if you were to have five or six - or even fifty or sixty - people present, but all of you being yourselves. This should be quite possible within the Spiritual Community, because here we are relating on the basis of the shared spiritual commitment, the shared spiritual ideal - relating on the basis of what is best and highest in each and every one of us. We therefore experience, within the Spiritual Community, a great relief and a great joy. There is no need to put up any psychological defences, no need to pretend, no need to guard against misunderstanding. With complete transparency we can be ourselves with others who are also being themselves.

In a situation like this, we naturally develop more rapidly than would otherwise be possible. We do a great deal for ourselves simply by being members of the Spiritual Community - that is to say, active members, though really there is no other kind.

What do members of the Spiritual Community also do for one another? Obviously they help one another in all possible ways - not just spiritually. They help one another psychologically, economically, and even in quite simple, everyday matters. However, I am going to mention two ways in which members of the Spiritual Community help one another which are particularly relevant. As I have said, within the Spiritual Community we relate on the basis of the common spiritual commitment, the common spiritual ideal. But this is not always easy. After all, many people 'join' the Spiritual Community: many people commit themselves. Among them there are people of many different kinds, having different backgrounds, different outlooks, different temperaments. We may find some of them quite easy to get on with, and others not so easy. We may find some of them impossible to get on with! So what are we to do? We do not want to leave the Spiritual Community, and we can hardly ask them to leave. There is only one thing for us to do: to work hard on it together. We have to recognize that what we have in common is much more important than what we do not have in common. We have to learn to relate - even painfully learn - on the basis of that which we do have in common. This certainly is not easy, but with patience we can gradually succeed. In this way, members of the Spiritual Community help one another - help one another to overcome purely subjective, purely personal limitations and learn how to relate on the basis of what is higher.

Again, spiritual life is not easy. It is not easy to eradicate unskilful thoughts, not easy to develop skilful ones. Sometimes we may feel like giving up altogether. 'It's too much for us, it goes too much against the grain, there are too many difficulties,' we may protest. We may even think of leaving the Spiritual Community. At times like these, members of the Spiritual Community help one another: support one another, encourage one another, inspire one another. This is the most important thing that they can do for one another, perhaps, this bearing one another up when they get into a difficult and disturbed condition, or when they get depressed, as any member of the Spiritual Community may until such time as he has his feet firmly on the Path. When going through this kind of crisis, it is a great comfort, a great consolation, to have around us others who sincerely wish us well, who desire our spiritual welfare, and who can help us through this quite difficult period.

Finally, what do members of the Spiritual Community do for the world? You might expect me to say here something about the role of the Spiritual Community in world history, or its significance for the total evolutionary process, but such considerations would take us beyond the scope of this brief exposition. I shall confine myself, instead, to a few practical points, and then conclude.

First of all, there is one thing that needs to be made clear. Members of the Spiritual Community are not obliged to do anything at all for the world. The operative word here being obliged. Whatever they do, they do quite freely: they do it because they want to, because they like doing it. There is no obligation involved. They do it, even, as part of the process of their own spiritual development, their own spiritual life. To put this in a slightly different way, the Spiritual Community does not have to justify its existence to the world. It does not have to show that it brings about social and economic improvements, that it is helpful to the government or the administration. It does not have to show that it benefits the world in a worldly sense.

However, in general, the members of the Spiritual Community do two things for the world. First of all, they keep the Spiritual Community itself in existence. One might say that it is good for the world that such a thing as the Spiritual Community should simply be there, good that there should be people around who are dedicated to the spiritual life, dedicated to the development of skilful states of mind. This is good because it helps to develop a more wholesome atmosphere in the world.

Secondly, members of the Spiritual Community help the world by building a bridge between the world and the Spiritual Community - or at least laying down a few stepping-stones. They do this by getting together, in teams of four, or five, or more, and conducting various activities conducive to the development of skilful mental states. These activities help people to evolve from the worldly plane to the mixed plane, perhaps even from the mixed plane to the spiritual plane. These activities might be meditation classes, retreats, lectures, yoga classes, courses in human communication, and so on. They are open to anyone who cares to take advantage of them: one does not even have to join anything, or pay a subscription!

In this way members of the Spiritual Community, or those individuals who are committed to the ideal of human Enlightenment - committed to the attainment of higher levels of consciousness and insight - help people in the world to develop more and more skilful thoughts, to grow in contentment, in love, and in understanding, and to know indeed, for themselves, the meaning of Spiritual Community.