

Lecture 123: The Growth of a Mahayana Sutra

Mr Chairman and Friends,

Most of us who are here think at least from time to time of the spiritual life. We think about the spiritual life in various ways, in various terms. And usually I think - most often, I think - we think of the spiritual life in terms of development. We think of it in terms of growth. We think of it in terms of opening, as it were, even as a flower opens. And this is perhaps, for many of us at least, the best and most appropriate and most helpful way of thinking of the spiritual life, in terms of development, in terms of growth. This is perhaps the way in which we've come to think of it in the course possibly even of a number of years.

But we can think of the spiritual life in other ways. We can think of it in other terms. We can think of it, for example, in terms of transformation. Not just transformation in the verbal, the literal sense. Not just transformation in the sense of a change of form, but in terms of something much more radical, something much more fundamental, something much more thoroughgoing than that. We can think of it in terms of a change even of consciousness, a change of being, a change that affects us from the bottom to the top, as it were, of our individuality. We can think of it as a change from a lower to a higher state, think of it in terms of a transition from what is worldly to what is spiritual, from what is mundane to what is transcendental. We can think of it in these terms, think of it in terms of transformation. And many of us surely today feel the need for this kind of change, this very thorough, very radical profound change amounting to a transformation.

Many of us even, if we were honest with ourselves, if we were to allow ourselves to think and to feel at all deeply, would have to admit that we wanted even to die, wanted to be reborn. Not die, at least not die necessarily in the flesh, but to die spiritually. To die as it were in the depths of our being so that we could be reborn also in the depths of our being, even in something more, something greater, than the depths of our being, and be reborn spiritually. Many of us feel the need for this kind of change, for this kind of transformation. Perhaps even we would go so far as to say that we were tired of the old self. We're tired, not to say fed up with ourselves as we are, as we have been, for such a very long time, perhaps for years upon years. So we're tired of this old self, we want a change from this old self. We would like if possible even to discard that old self, just to leave it behind. We feel the need sometimes for an entirely new, shining as it were, pristine self. Of course I am speaking in terms of self - one mustn't take it too literally. The self that one wants, of course, the new self that one wants, this shining pristine self, is a self that in Buddhist terms at least is not a self. We'd like to emerge if we possibly could just like a butterfly from the chrysalis of all our old conditions. We'd like to enjoy an entirely new life, we'd like to enjoy a life of greater freedom, of greater happiness, greater joy, greater awareness, greater spontaneity than we at present experience. So we want to be transformed.

And not only that, we're not only very often tired of the old self, tired of ourselves as we are and as we have been. We are tired of the old world as well. And we want a new world, a world that doesn't hinder us in our development, our spiritual development, at every step. A world that is more conducive to spiritual development. More conducive to the whole process of the transformation of self. So this means that also very often we're tired of the old culture, we're tired of the old civilisation which surrounds us, the civilisation which only too often attaches such an exaggerated importance to material things. Sometimes too we're tired of the old arts, tired of all those arts which express perhaps the sick mind and the diseased imagination. And also we're tired of the old social, political and economic arrangements of various kinds which in some countries at least hardly allow one to lead a decent human life - not to speak even of a spiritual life. So in this sort of mood, feeling in this sort of way, we want everything to be changed. We want everything to be made new, want even the world to be transformed.

So this transformation, this kind of transformation, this transformation of the self and of the world is the basic concern of the spiritual life properly understood. And as perhaps you've been able to understand from the few introductory words spoken by the Chairman, Lokamitra, it's also the basic concern of the Western Buddhist Order and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. It's the basic concern, in fact, of Buddhism itself. And it's this transformation, this same transformation, that we are concerned with in the *Sutra of Golden Light*. The Golden Light is the light that transforms, the light that transforms the self, that transforms the world.

And this light, this golden light, this light that transforms both self and world, is a spiritual light. We may even say more than a spiritual light, a transcendental light - not transcendental in its more fashionable

modern sense, but transcendental in the traditional Buddhist sense of *lokottara*, that which is beyond the world, beyond the mundane, beyond the conditioned. And being transcendental in this way, being beyond, being beyond the world, beyond the mundane, beyond the conditioned, it is a light which we may say is without beginning and without end. A light which does not shine forth from anything, from anywhere, from any particular direction, any particular place, though it may appear to do so or even be spoken of as doing so. It is, we may say, the light of truth, the light of Reality, the light of the Buddha - or rather, that light is the light which is the Truth, which is Reality, which is the Buddha. And it is to this light that we shall in effect be exposing ourselves in the course of the next eight weeks as we go through the *Sutra of Golden Light*.

So, what is this *Sutra of Golden Light* or, as it is sometimes known, the Sutra of Supreme Golden Light? What is it? Briefly, in just a very few words, it's one of the Buddhist scriptures. It's a very popular scripture, a scripture that has been and still is very popular in China, in Japan, in Tibet, in Nepal. And speaking a little technically it's what is known as a Mahayana Sutra. So when we say that it's not only a Buddhist scripture, but that it is a Mahayana Sutra, this at once raises two further questions - that is to say, 'What is the Mahayana?' and 'What is a Sutra?'

So first of all, what is the Mahayana? The word itself, which is Sanskrit, means literally 'the Great Way', or the 'Great Vehicle'. And the Mahayana, the Great Way or the Great Vehicle, is one of the three major historical forms of Buddhism, especially of Indian Buddhism. And it's important to understand it isn't a particular sect or a particular school. It's much more like a broad general spiritual movement affecting all aspects of the religious, the artistic and even the social life. It's a movement, we may say, of spiritual renewal and of spiritual revival, we could even say a movement of reaction against a narrow interpretation of the letter of the Buddha's Teaching. We could say that the Mahayana represents a return to the spirit of the Buddha's teaching. But at the same time the Mahayana is not simply, not merely a movement of reaction. The Mahayana, the Great Way, the Great Vehicle, possesses a positive spiritual character of its own that transcends the immediate historical context. And this character can best be described as universal. The Great Way, the Great Vehicle is universal. Lama Anagarika Govinda, of whom I'm sure many of you have heard, indeed speaks of the Mahayana in these sort of terms. He speaks of the universal perspective of the Mahayana, the universal perspective, which is a very good expression for it indeed.

Now I've said that the Mahayana means Great Way or Great Vehicle. And it's so called because it is a Way or a Vehicle for a great number of people, a large number of people, in fact for all sentient beings. It's a way to Enlightenment for a great number of people. It's a vehicle to carry them to the state of Nirvana. And for this reason the Mahayana stresses the Ideal of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is one who is bent on Enlightenment (that's the literal meaning of the term), one who is self-dedicated to the highest spiritual realisation. But he's bent on it, he's dedicated to it, not for his own sake only but for the sake, for the benefit, of all sentient beings, all living beings. And such a Bodhisattva therefore makes in the Mahayana four great vows expressive of his dedication and determination. He vows:

"However innumerable beings are, I vow to deliver them.
However inexhaustible the passions are, I vow to extinguish them.
However immeasurable the Dharmas are, I vow to master them.
However incomparable the Buddha's Truth is, I vow to attain it."

Now I've spoken of the Bodhisattva, and the Bodhisattva is spoken of traditionally in the scriptures and so on, as a person. But if we look at the Bodhisattva closely, or if we try to look at the Bodhisattva closely, if we try to get some idea, some real feeling of what the Bodhisattva is like, we shall soon realise that the Bodhisattva is not really a person literally at all. A Bodhisattva is much more like a sort of suprapersonal stream of spiritual energy, certainly in the later, more advanced stages of his spiritual career. So the Mahayana, the Great Way, the Great Vehicle, encourages everybody to become a Bodhisattva. It encourages everybody to aspire to the highest spiritual realisation, that is to say, to Supreme Buddhahood for the sake of all. In other words, the Mahayana encourages everyone to cooperate in what it thinks of, what it describes as the great work of universal deliverance, or universal emancipation, or if you like, the great work of universal transformation. And for the Mahayana therefore the Bodhisattva Ideal is a universal ideal. It's universal in its aim, which is nothing less than supreme Buddhahood, universal in scope, its scope being all sentient beings, and universal also in its frame of reference, which is infinite space and boundless time.

Now the Bodhisattvas are often described as heroes, even as great heroes - Mahaviras. But of course we have to admit not everybody wants to be a hero. Not everybody wants to be a Bodhisattva, not even among followers of the Mahayana. Strange to say, some people are quite reluctant to gain supreme Buddhahood. They have to be encouraged, they have to be helped, they have to be given a helping hand - not to say a crutch or two. So the Bodhisattva adopts a variety of what we technically call skilful means, sometimes translated as 'expedient means'. And these are different means, different methods, of helping people spiritually in accordance with their present stage of development, in accordance with their particular temperament, their particular position in life, their general outlook on life and so on - even without their noticing that they are being helped in some cases. In other words, the Bodhisattva tries to meet people half way. He tries to meet them, to encounter them, on their own ground. He speaks, he tries to speak, he tries to learn their language. He tries to communicate with them in their language. He tries to make things easy for them, as easy, that is to say, as is compatible with the objective requirements of the spiritual life.

Even a Bodhisattva, great as he may be, willing as he may be, helpful as he may be, cannot do it for you. He can only encourage, he can only guide, he can only advise, he can only inspire. Your own active cooperation is always required, even if that activity of yours consists simply in being receptive to his influence. Sometimes, of course, the Bodhisattva helps simply by being around - not necessarily by being around in as it were his official Bodhisattva's capacity complete with his jewelled headdress and his lotus throne - he may sometimes leave those behind - but by being around simply as a positive, as a friendly, as a sympathetic, as a warm-hearted human being. Sometimes the Bodhisattva helps by encouraging people just to perform skilful actions, helps them not to be afraid of doing something good, helps them to observe the precepts, to offer food, (especially this is so in the East, to the wandering monks), to cooperate in building temples and monasteries and centres. Sometimes the Bodhisattva helps by encouraging people in the performance of simple devotional acts - acts which are simple in form but so meaningful in content like offering flowers to the Buddha, or reciting mantras, or going on pilgrimage to holy places.

And in this way, as the Bodhisattva helps people, as he meets them half way, as he learns to speak their language, there comes into existence the more popular side of the Mahayana, not to say the more ethnic side. And this more popular side does not represent a degeneration of the teaching. It represents a kind of bridge, a bridge between ordinary worldly life on the one hand and purely spiritual life, even transcendental life, on the other. This popular side of Buddhism, of Mahayana Buddhism, represents a degeneration only when it becomes an end in itself, which usually means when there are no Bodhisattvas around to remind us of what the meaning and purpose and function of it all is, or when the ultimate goal of Supreme Buddhahood is lost sight of - when, in a word, people build houses on the bridge, instead of passing across the bridge to the other side.

Now popular Mahayana is very widespread indeed. It covers, or at least covered, the greater part of Asia. We may say popular Buddhism itself is very widespread indeed. And popular Buddhism, and especially popular Mahayana Buddhism, often incorporates various elements from the indigenous culture of the country, the people to which in the course of centuries it has spread. In India, where the Mahayana arose, it incorporated elements of Indian, indigenous Indian culture, belief and practice. And it did the same thing when it went to China, when it went to Japan, when it went to Tibet, and so on. And we may say that popular Mahayana is so widespread or has been so widespread, has been so abundant in growth, so luxuriant in its development, that some modern scholars have tended to think of the Mahayana itself as an essentially popular movement. But this a great mistake. The Mahayana certainly is a popular movement, historically speaking, but at the same time the Mahayana is very profound. And it's not just intellectually profound, it's spiritually profound.

And the spiritual profundity of the Mahayana is exemplified particularly in the teachings which centre upon Perfect Wisdom or, as it sometimes rendered, 'Transcendental Wisdom' or the 'Wisdom that has gone beyond' - gone beyond, that is to say, gone to ultimate reality. And this ultimate reality to which Perfect Wisdom has gone is known technically in the Mahayana as *sunyata*, which literally means the Voidness, sometimes translated as Emptiness. But it's not voidness in the sense of vacuity, not emptiness in the sense of vacuity. It's void, it's voidness, in the sense that it is beyond all concepts, beyond thought, beyond the reach of the rational human mind. Perfect Wisdom is sometimes regarded as the highest spiritual faculty that intuits the Voidness, and voidness, *sunyata*, as what is intuited by Perfect Wisdom - the one is as it were the subject, the other the object. But at the same time in reality from the standpoint, if there is such a thing as a standpoint in this connection, from the standpoint of *sunyata* there's no such distinction, there's just one unbroken awareness, not divided, not bifurcated into the polarity of subject and object.

And the Bodhisattva has to develop Perfect Wisdom - it's that which makes the Bodhisattva a Bodhisattva. He has to realise voidness, realise *sunyata*, has to remove, has to transcend the distinction between self and others, and only then, paradoxically, can he work for others, only then can he help others. So the Bodhisattva Ideal does not represent a kind of humanitarianism, not even a religious humanitarianism. The Bodhisattva Ideal represents the wisdom of the Voidness breaking through into, functioning in the midst of the world, in the midst of the affairs of everyday life.

Now we might think that because the Mahayana emphasises Wisdom, it neglects faith and devotion, but again this would be a mistake. In the Mahayana, devotion is also emphasised. Indeed, in the Mahayana devotion in all its forms, some of them very colourful forms, is particularly intense. And that devotion in the Mahayana is directed not only to the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, but to the ideal Buddha, if you like the universal Buddha, the eternal Buddha, to the Buddha who occupies the centre of the spiritual universe of the Mahayana - directed in fact to a number of different forms of that Buddha, different aspects of that Buddha. There is, for instance, Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light. There is Vairocana, the Buddha of Sun-like Splendour. And in the same way, the devotion of the Mahayana is directed to the great, as it were archetypal Bodhisattvas, Bodhisattvas who are, or who have become, streams of suprapersonal, spiritual energy, like Avalokitesvara, the Lord who looks down in compassion, Manjusri, the gentle-voiced one, the Lord of Wisdom, Samantabhadra, the universally beneficent, and Ksitigarbha, the Earth Womb, who descends into the depths of the states of suffering. The devotion of the Mahayana is directed towards all these great beings.

So the *Sutra of Golden Light* is a Mahayana sutra. It exemplifies many of the general characteristics of the Mahayana movement, exemplifies for instance its universality, its emphasis on the Bodhisattva Ideal, its spirit of intense devotion, its plurality of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. But it also possesses certain special features of its own, as we shall see. But it's time we passed on to the second question.

The *Sutra of Golden Light* is a Mahayana sutra, but what exactly is a sutra? What is a sutra? A sutra in brief is a Buddhist scripture, rather it's one kind of Buddhist scripture, perhaps we can say the most important and the most representative kind of Buddhist scripture. Now what is a scripture? A scripture means simply a writing, a scripture is simply something written down. But the sutras, the Buddhist sutras, and least of all the Mahayana sutras, are not primarily literary documents. They are literary recensions of oral traditions and it's very important to remember this, very important to understand this, that they are literary recensions of oral traditions.

We must never forget that the Buddha himself, the historical Sakyamuni, did not write anything. It's not even certain - and this should perhaps give us great food for thought - it's not even clear whether he could read and write. He committed nothing to writing. In his day, spiritual teachings were considered far too sacred to be committed to anything as secular as writing. Teaching was always given orally and transmitted orally. So the Buddha too taught orally, he spoke, he conversed, he held discussions, he gave discourses, and people, disciples, remembered what he had said. Sometimes, indeed, his words were so memorable that the disciples couldn't possibly forget. In a few cases, of course, in the case of some disciples, perhaps they didn't remember, perhaps they did forget. But those who did remember passed on what they remembered, passed on the teaching as they had heard it, as they had understood it, passed it on to their disciples, and they passed it on to theirs. And in this way, the Buddha's teaching was orally transmitted in India for many, many generations.

It was even arranged orally and edited orally, and this surely must have been a tremendous feat. The monks, the early disciples, not only remembered hundreds and thousands of teachings, but they arranged the teachings and edited the teachings while they were still being orally transmitted. They even catalogued them, and in some cases they even indexed them orally, without putting pen to paper, without putting stylus to palm leaf, even once. It was all done orally. It was all carried in the memory, all carried in the heads of these old monks. Surely, as I've said, this was a tremendous feat.

And the whole process, the whole tradition of oral transmission is especially associated with the name of Ananda. Ananda was the cousin of the Buddha, and for the last twenty years of the Buddha's life, Ananda was his constant companion. Wherever the Buddha went, Ananda went. If the Buddha went for alms, well, Ananda went for alms not far behind the Buddha. If the Buddha gave a discourse, Ananda was there listening. If the Buddha accepted an invitation, Ananda was also included. So for twenty years the Buddha and Ananda were hardly separated for more than a few hours. And Ananda had a remarkably retentive memory, and he remembered everything that the Buddha had said.

I used, I must confess, to have my doubts about this, whether Ananda really could - this is a little confession, as it were - whether Ananda really could have remembered everything that the Buddha said, and where he said it and when he said it, and to whom, but luckily for me some years ago I met somebody who remembered everything that I said and could tell me in detail word for word what I had said and where I had said it and when I had said it and why I had said it, and he apparently had it all filed away in his mind. So after meeting, after getting to know, that person, I lost all my doubts about Ananda and his retentive memory.

So Ananda remembered everything that he had heard the Buddha say. And after the Buddha's death, after the Buddha's Parinirvana as we call it, he repeated everything that he had heard, everything that he remembered, at a gathering of monks held in a great cave near Rajagrha, in the state of Magadha, the modern Bihar. This gathering, by the way, this gathering of monks held after the Buddha's Parinirvana, is sometimes referred to as the First Council, but it wasn't really a council at all. The word in Sanskrit and Pali is *sangiti*, which literally means a chanting, or a singing even, together. The monks, and there were supposed to be five hundred of them, chanted or sang together what they remembered of the Buddha's teaching, and especially what Ananda remembered, what he had contributed to as it were the collective memory of the spiritual community. And therefore almost every sutra, almost every Buddhist scripture, begins with the words 'Thus I have heard at one time' - and the 'I' here is supposed to be Ananda. It is Ananda speaking and saying 'Thus have I heard at one time.' He is saying that this is what he once heard the Buddha, the Enlightened One, saying. He says he had been present, he'd heard it all or if he had not been present the Buddha had repeated it all to him afterwards. And these words at the beginning of a text, at the beginning of a sutra, at the beginning of a scripture, are believed therefore to guarantee the authenticity of that sutra, the authenticity of the teaching it contains. 'Thus have I heard at one time.'

Now I've said that the sutra or a sutra is one kind of scripture, one kind of Buddhist scripture. And it's one kind of scripture because it's based on one kind of oral tradition, or one form of oral tradition, oral communication - one kind in respect to form but not necessarily in respect to content. The Buddha, we know, taught in a variety of ways, in a variety of forms, and even during the period of oral transmission there was a list drawn up of nine or twelve ways or forms which the Dharma as an oral communication assumed. And these were later regarded as subdivisions of the canonical literature, the scriptures - but the list is essentially oral in origin.

First of all, for instance, *gatha*. *Gatha* means verse. The Buddha - this may come as a surprise to some of you - did not always speak in prose. He sometimes spoke in verse - and this was not so difficult as it might sound, because the ancient Indian languages like Sanskrit and Pali slid we may say more easily into metre than does modern English. So what would happen would be that someone would ask the Buddha a question. This very often happened. People were always coming to the Buddha and putting questions. Sometimes even the question was put in verse and the Buddha replied in verse. Even when the question was put in prose, he'd sometimes reply in verse. Perhaps he thought that if he replied in verse then what he said could be more easily remembered, more easily memorised. So he replied in verse, in *gatha* form. He just produced on the spot, spontaneously, a little stanza, or a series of stanzas, a series of verses, and some of these verses are collected in a very well-known Buddhist work, a very well-known Buddhist scripture, called the *Dhammapada*.

Then there is the form of oral communication which is called *udana*. What does *udana* mean? *Udana* literally means 'the outward-going breath'. According to ancient Indian tradition there are five different kinds of breath. So one was the outward-going breath - the breath which was forcibly exhaled or expired - and this was called the *udana*. So *udana* as a particular kind of utterance of the Buddha, and later a particular kind of scripture, represents a spontaneous utterance on the Buddha's part. He's not asked a question. No-one puts anything to him. He may even be alone. But suddenly there comes the *udana*. The *udana* represents an utterance of the Buddha under as it were tremendous pressure of spiritual emotion. The *udana* is in fact rather like an explosion. We may say that the Buddha explodes into utterance. He can't keep it to himself. It forces its way out and this is the *udana*. And usually though not always the *udana* also is in verse.

And then there is what is called *geya*. *Geya* is a mixture of prose and verse. The Buddha spoke sometimes in prose intermixed, interspersed, with verses. And sometimes he gave his teaching first in prose and then repeated it all in verse, and sometimes the verse differs slightly from the prose. In this way also he communicated, in this form also. And then there's the *jataka*. *Jataka* means 'a birth story'. Here the Buddha relates an incident or incidents from one or another of his previous existences. And then there's

the *abhutadharma*. This means a marvellous event, a wonderful happening, and here there's a description of some extraordinary occurrence in the Buddha's own life - and very often this occurrence is of a nature that we would describe as or regard as magical.

And in the same way, in the same way that we've got *gatha*, *udana*, *geya*, *jataka* and the rest, we've also got *sutra*. Sutra literally means just 'a thread' - and a thread is what connects. Just as we say we've lost the thread of what we were saying, we've lost the connection, so sutra is a sort of connected discourse, a discourse, a connected discourse by the Buddha, one could almost say a lecture delivered by the Buddha, except that it's usually not dry as very often lectures are, but of a highly inspirational nature. And both in its oral and its later literary form, sutras are often very lengthy and this is perhaps why, as I said in the beginning, the sutra is perhaps the most important and representative kind of Buddhist scripture.

Now as regards content, sutras are broadly of two kinds. There are Hinayana sutras and there are Mahayana sutras. The Hinayana is of course the first of the three major historical forms of Buddhism. Hinayana literally means Little Way or Little Vehicle. And like the Mahayana it's more of the nature of a broad spiritual movement than a particular sect or a particular school. And the Hinayana is traditionally regarded at least by the Mahayana as the way or the vehicle of those who are concerned predominantly with their own individual spiritual development, not so much with that of others. The third major historical form of Buddhism, of course is the Vajrayana, the Way or Vehicle of the Diamond or the Thunderbolt. There are only two major Vajrayana sutras - the Vajrayana tradition usually finds expression in what are known as *tantras* and *sadhanas*.

Now the Hinayana and the Mahayana sutras are very different indeed in character. The Hinayana sutras are much more what we would call of a historical nature. In them the Buddha's Teaching, the Dharma, is very firmly embedded, not to say embodied, in a concrete historical context. And this concrete historical context is the content or the context rather of Northern India, especially northeastern India in the 6th century BC. So we find in the Hinayana scriptures many references to the current political situation. I could give you many examples but I think I'd better not, it would take up too much time - but many references to the current political situation, that is to say the political situation during the Buddha's own lifetime, especially the later part of that lifetime. Then there are references, many references, to the economic conditions of that time; many references to various social customs and then references to various currents of contemporary religious belief and philosophical speculation and opinion. We find all these things in the Hinayana sutras. We even find information in the Hinayana sutras about such things as dress, food, the sort of food that people ate, the sort of crops that they grew, the sort of houses that they built. There's information also about their various amusements, games that they played - there's a whole list in one of the texts, in one of the sutras, of thirty or forty different kinds of games that people played in those days. And then references to all sort of trades and professions and occupations.

And in addition there are references to the natural features of the country or rather the subcontinent of India itself. There are references to, descriptions of, the great impenetrable forests and the majestic broad-flowing rivers. There are references to the mountains, the great mountain ranges, especially to the Himalayas, and to the various seasons of the Indian year - to the hot season, the cold season, the rainy season. And there are references to the flora and fauna of the country, of the subcontinent. Descriptions of all sorts of animals and birds and trees, flowers, insects. In other words, in the Hinayana sutras we get a very detailed and a very vivid picture of the India that was contemporaneous with Solon and Lycurgus in Greece, Pythagoras in Italy, Zoroaster in Persia, and Confucius in China. And in this India the Buddha taught. And he taught all sorts of people. In the Hinayana sutras we find the Buddha teaching wandering monks and ascetics, Brahmins, kings, princes, ministers, businessmen, farmers, philosophers, robbers, prostitutes, outcasts. We find him teaching and helping all.

But in the Mahayana sutras we find a very different picture. The Mahayana sutras present us with a very different picture. In many of the Mahayana sutras we are still in India, yes, but only just. We could also say, in the Mahayana sutras, or at least in some of the Mahayana sutras, we're still on Earth, but only just. Indeed in a few of the Mahayana sutras, we're not on Earth at all. We're in some other world, some higher world, some heavenly world, even some transcendental world, we hardly know where - and we hardly care where because it is so beautiful and so entrancing. In the majority of the Mahayana sutras, however, the main features of the landscape, even of the Indian landscape are still, albeit dimly, visible. We can still see houses, we can still see trees, or at least we can see, as though through a radiant mist, a solitary mountain peak. But in the Mahayana sutras everything is changed, everything has been transformed. In the Mahayana sutra, we may say, everything has been transfigured. Everything is bathed in a sort of supernatural light.

And not only that. As we go through the Mahayana sutras, as we listen to the Mahayana sutras, as we participate in the Mahayana sutras, it's not just that we see everything bathed in a supernatural light. We hear also celestial music sounding, and we smell celestial perfumes, and sometimes showers of great golden blossoms fall raining down from the sky. And in some Mahayana sutras, as some of us know, the scene expands even to infinity. It expands to include not just this world, not even just this universe, but thousands upon thousands of worlds, and thousands upon thousands of universes, all with their own Buddhas, all with their own Bodhisattvas, all with their own presentations of the Dharma.

And in the midst of it all, at the centre of the Mahayana sutra, there sits the Buddha, the Buddha of the Mahayana. And he sits usually in the Mahayana sutras on an enormous many-petalled lotus throne supported by pairs of gigantic lions. And he sits under enormous trees, trees which are made of all kinds of glittering and resplendent jewels. And he's surrounded not just by a few beggarly-looking monks. He's surrounded by a great host of beings, especially by a great host of Bodhisattvas, and from the great host and especially from the Buddha himself there emanates in the Mahayana sutras a great blaze of light. And it is this Buddha, seated there in the midst of that great blaze of light, who teaches the Mahayana sutras. And while he teaches, what happens? While he teaches, all sorts of marvels occur. The earth shakes in various ways. There's a rain of flowers falling from the sky. And those listening to the exposition of the Dharma, the Mahayana Dharma, by the Buddha in the Mahayana sutras experience all kinds of wonderful, transcendental, spiritual insights. So we see, so we find, that the world of the Mahayana is a world of light. It's a world of colour. It's a world of indescribable beauty and inexpressible joy.

But at the same time, it's a very mysterious world, a very awe-inspiring world. We feel that there is in it something that we don't understand, something that is unfathomable, something that we can't understand. We feel that there is something in it, in this Mahayana world, that eludes the mind, that baffles the mind. But yet at the same time, strangely, paradoxically, as we encounter this world of the Mahayana, we feel wonderfully happy and satisfied and serene, even peaceful, just as we contemplate that world, as we experience that world. And we may say that there's nothing quite like the Mahayana sutra in the entire spiritual literature of the world, not even in Buddhist literature. There's nothing quite like their atmosphere, their spirit. Sometimes they seem to read like a sort of transcendental science fiction. The nearest western parallel, we may say, is some of the Gnostic sacred books, like the *Pistis Sophia*, the faith wisdom. These gnostic books too are suffused with light and pervaded with a sense of mystery. Whether there's any historical connection between Mahayana Buddhism on the one hand and Gnosticism on the other, I wouldn't like to say. Dr Conze believes that there is a connection, but the whole subject awaits thorough investigation. But certainly there is a slight but definite resemblance of spirit. And there may be a very very faint reflection of that same spirit even later on in Western literature when we come to the Arthurian cycle and particularly to the Legend of the Holy Grail. But here we are beginning to enter the region of conjecture and surmise.

Chronologically speaking there are two great groups of Mahayana sutras, and these are the early sutras and the late sutras. The early sutras, the early Mahayana sutras, are those whose appearance, as we say, that is to say whose reduction to writing and public circulation, antedates Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna is the greatest figure in Indian Mahayana Buddhism. It was Nagarjuna who was responsible for promulgating on a wide scale the distinctively Mahayana teachings, especially the Perfect Wisdom teaching. We're not quite sure exactly when Nagarjuna lived. There are not many dates at this period. But he flourished, as scholars usually say, probably in the second century CE. And he wrote a number of very important works which are still very widely and deeply studied including the celebrated 'Verses on the Middle Way', the *Madhyamika Karikas*. And in these various works of his, he quotes from various Mahayana sutras. So because he quotes from them we know that these particular sutras were in circulation as literary documents by his time. And among these sutras, these Mahayana sutras, which Nagarjuna quotes in his writing, are the *White Lotus Sutra*, that is to say the *Saddharma-pundarika*; the *Perfect Wisdom in 8000 Lines*, the *Astahasrika Prajnaparamita*; the *Exposition of Vimalakirti*, the *Vimalakirti Nirdesa*; and the sutras, the two sutras, on the *Array of the Happy Land*, the *Sukhavativyuha Sutras*; and then also the *Sutra of Ten Stages* or *Dasabhumika*, the Ten stages of the Bodhisattva's Progress.

The late sutras, the late Mahayana sutras, include equally well-known names. Among them there's the *Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom*, the Sutra in no less than 100,000 Verses. Then there's the *Diamond Sutra*, shorter, much shorter, but even better known. And there's the Entry into Lanka, the *Lankavatara Sutra*, as well as the *Nirvana Sutra* and many others. So also included among the late Mahayana sutras is the *Sutra of Golden Light*.

The *Sutra of Golden Light* appeared during the period from the 5th century AD to the 8th century AD, that is to say, appeared as a literary document - and of course it appeared in India. It appeared in the language which western scholars generally call Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit. How long the *Sutra of Golden Light* existed as an oral tradition before being written down we've no means of knowing, but in spirit at least it goes back to the time of the Buddha, to the historical Buddha. Now the sutra, the *Sutra of Golden Light*, did not appear all at once. It did not appear fully formed, complete. When we say that it appeared during the period 5th to the 8th century AD we don't mean that it appeared at some particular point within that period. We mean that it took the whole of that period to emerge, in other words a period of three hundred years. It took three hundred years to emerge gradually as a literary document. And this is not at all unusual. Many of the sutras, especially the Mahayana sutras, were written down in this fashion - for instance the *White Lotus Sutra* and the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines*.

Let's try to understand the general situation. As I said, the Buddha wrote nothing, he taught orally, and after his death there was a vast mass of oral tradition of various kinds, and this oral tradition was arranged by the monks, edited by the monks, even elaborated by the monks. And this period of oral transmission of purely oral transmission, of the Buddha's teaching of the Dharma, without perhaps even one word being written down, lasted roughly four hundred years. And then, and only then, the monks started writing the teachings down. And even then they didn't write them down all at once. The whole process, the whole great process, of writing down the Buddhist scriptures, writing down the oral tradition, writing down what the Buddha had taught orally, lasted for one thousand years. From the first century BC to the 10th century AD, during all that period, that period of a thousand years, oral traditions were being committed to writing as scriptures. And broadly speaking the more exoteric teachings were committed to writing first, and the more esoteric remained oral traditions for longer and were committed to writing later.

So the Buddhist scriptures are thus not really literary compositions, and they shouldn't be judged as literature. We may say, we may describe them, as successive literary deposits from the oral tradition. And what happened on a larger scale in the case of the Buddhist scriptures as a whole happened on a much smaller scale, in the case of individual scriptures, particularly in the case of the longer Mahayana sutras. Some of them are written down as it were in instalments. And this was the case with the *Sutra of Golden Light*. It was written down in instalments over that three hundred year period. And this is why we speak in the title of this lecture of the growth of a Mahayana Sutra.

The original nucleus of the Sutra is the famous, the very famous, the very celebrated and widely used chapter of confession. This is now chapter three of the existing text, and around this confession the remainder of the sutra was built up. This has been demonstrated in detail by Nobel in his introduction to his edition of the Sanskrit text of the Sutra. Now I've spoken of the remainder of the Sutra being built up round this nucleus, round the confession, but it would be more correct really to speak of the confession as attracting other material, other oral traditions, to itself.

I've said that the sutra was written down in instalments, but we must be careful to guard against misunderstanding. A sutra is not a work of literature, primarily, so there's no question of it having a logical sequence. There's no question of a purely artistic structure, a purely artistic unity. Most Mahayana sutras possess a nucleus, and this nucleus represents, we may say, the sort of centre of spiritual energy. And this centre of spiritual energy, if it's sufficiently powerful, will attract to itself fragments from the vast mass of floating oral tradition. In the case of the *Sutra of Golden Light*, this nucleus, the centre of spiritual energy of the sutra is the confession, and it's the confession that has as it were attracted to itself other material, other teachings from the oral tradition. What the principle of that attraction is we'll see a little later on.

Now we saw some time ago that a sutra was a connected discourse, a discourse by the Buddha, and this is approximately correct, it's correct as far as it goes, but there are many exceptions, many modifications. And in the case of the *Sutra of Golden Light*, the most important part of the whole sutra, which as I've said is the confession, is not spoken by the Buddha at all. So this is a strange situation. The central part of the whole sutra - and a sutra is supposed to be a discourse by the Buddha - is not spoken by the Buddha at all. It's not even spoken by a Bodhisattva. So who is it spoken by, what is it spoken by? Well, it's spoken by a drum, it's spoken by a golden drum. And not only that. It's spoken in somebody's dream.

Moreover, in some of the Mahayana sutras there's no question of just sitting back and as it were listening to a definite or specific discourse of the Buddha or whoever else is speaking. There's no question even of just watching what is going on. We don't always realise this at first; we realise it gradually after a while.

We read the sutra or we hear the sutra read. We hear the Buddha in the sutra, perhaps others in the sutra, talking about the sutra, and we see all sorts of marvellous things happening in the sutra. But then we start wondering where and what is the sutra? We seem unable to locate the sutra, unable to identify it. We're supposed to be listening to the sutra, people are talking about the Sutra, but where is the sutra? What is the sutra? There seems to be no Sutra! There's no Mahayana sutra! Everyone's talking about it, referring to it, praising it - but where is the sutra? We can't see it, we can't find it. So it gradually dawns on us that the sutra is what is happening in the sutra. And it also dawns on us that one is oneself involved in what is happening in the sutra. The *Sutra of Golden Light* refers to itself as 'the profound Buddha region' - not, doesn't refer to itself as, a particular kind of text or scripture. It refers to itself as 'the profound Buddha region'. So what does this mean? It means that the *Sutra of Golden Light* is a whole world, a spiritual world, and it is this world that we shall be exploring in the course of the next eight weeks.

But it's time now for a very rapid survey of the contents of the Sutra, a very rapid survey indeed. This will give you some idea of the material with which we shall be dealing in the course of these eight weeks. After giving that rapid survey of the sutra, we'll then indicate how we propose to organise the material of the sutra in this lecture and then conclude.

Now the existing text of the sutra is divided into nineteen chapters, and the first chapter is introductory. In this first introductory chapter we find ourselves with the Buddha on the Vulture's Peak, where so many of the Mahayana Sutras were delivered, not far from the city of Rajagrha. And we find Ananda. And Ananda's not just listening, not just remembering - he's questioning. He questions the Buddha, and the Buddha replies. And he replies praising the *Sutra of Golden Light*.

In chapter two we're introduced to a Bodhisattva called Ruchiraketu, which means Beautiful Comet. And Ruchiraketu lives in Rajagrha. He is a Bodhisattva, which means he is a very good, even a very advanced Buddhist, but he's worried. And what is he worried about? Well he's got a problem. No, it's not a psychological problem. It's a spiritual problem, even a metaphysical problem. He is worried by the question of why the Buddha has such a short life - only eighty years. So four Buddhas appear to him, and as a result of the appearance of those four Buddhas, he comes to understand that the Buddha's length of life is in fact immeasurable.

In chapter three the same Bodhisattva has a dream. And in this dream he sees a Brahmin beating a drum, a golden drum, and the drum sends forth a series of beautiful verses of confession. It's these verses which are of course the nucleus of the whole sutra.

In chapter four, which is called Abundance of Lotuses, the Buddha himself speaks, and he tells of a king who had once praised the Buddhas of the past, present and future. And though we are not explicitly told so, this king is apparently the Bodhisattva Ruchiraketu in a previous existence.

Chapter five deals with emptiness, it's called On Emptiness, *sunyata*, it deals with the subject of *sunyata*.

Chapter six is the longest chapter of the whole sutra; it occupies a fifth of its total length. And in it the four Great Kings, that is to say the Protectors of the four quarters of the World, promise to protect the sutra, that is to say, the *Sutra of Golden Light*. In particular they promise to protect the monks who proclaim it and the kings who promote it.

In the next two chapters, and in chapter ten, three goddesses come forward and they all make similar promises to protect the sutra. And these three goddesses are Sarasvati, the goddess of learning, Sri, the goddess of wealth, and Drdha, the earth goddess.

Chapter nine deals with the maintenance of the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and in this chapter various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are enumerated, simply enumerated and saluted. And among them there are several that play a prominent part in other Mahayana Sutras.

In chapter eleven Samjnaya, the general of a class of deities known as Yaksas, comes forward, and he also promises to protect the sutra.

Chapter twelve is entitled On Instruction Concerning Divine Kings, and it deals with the ethical, even spiritual, basis of kingship.

In chapter thirteen the Buddha, apparently, is speaking, and he describes how in a previous life as a king called Susambhava he invited a monk called Ratnoccaya to expound the *Sutra of Golden Light*. And he also describes how he made offerings to the sutra on a rather lavish scale.

Chapter fourteen is entitled On the Refuge of the Yaksas. Here the Buddha addresses Sri, the goddess of wealth, and he explains that those who want to worship the Buddhas of the past, present and future should listen to the *Sutra of Golden Light*. He also enumerates a long list of deities that will protect the Sutra.

Chapter fifteen is a chapter of prophecy and prediction. Ten thousand gods come into the presence of the Buddha, come down from heaven. They come to hear the Dharma. And the Buddha predicts that in the infinitely remote future they will all attain to Buddhahood through their faith in the *Sutra of Golden Light*.

Chapter sixteen is entitled On Healing Illness. It describes how Jalavahana the merchant's son learned the whole medical art from his father, and how he travelled all over India curing people of their illnesses. This chapter gives a lot of information about ancient Indian ideas concerning the origin and treatment of disease, and there is particular reference to the influence on health of food and drink and the seasons of the year.

Chapters seventeen and eighteen are versions of Jataka stories. In the first, Jalavahana saves ten thousand fish from dying of drought, and these 10,000 fish are eventually reborn as gods in heaven, and out of gratitude they come and shower Jalavahana with 40,000 pearl necklaces one night while he is lying asleep. In this chapter there's also a statement of the Law of Conditioned Coproduction or Dependent Origination. In the second Jataka story the Buddha in a previous existence sacrifices his life to save the life of a starving tigress and her five cubs. This is of course one of the best known of all the Jataka stories, and it's here related at some length.

Chapter nineteen, the last chapter, is entitled On Praise of All the Tathagathas. And here, in this chapter, innumerable Bodhisattvas sing the praises of a certain Buddha. His name is so long I won't give it to you. It covers one and a half pages of text. And the Bodhisattva Ruchiraketu also sings the praises of that same Buddha, as does a certain goddess, also with a very long name that I won't give you. And amid general rejoicing the sutra then concludes.

Now this summary certainly does not do justice to the sutra. It doesn't do justice to its spirit of fervent devotion. The whole sutra simply thrills with devotion to the Buddha and to the *Sutra of Golden Light*. And the summary does not do justice to what is at times its very great literary beauty. There are very beautiful hymns and praise to the Buddha in this sutra, as beautiful as any we will meet with in Buddhist literature anywhere. But this summary does perhaps do justice to just one thing - to the highly composite, not to say miscellaneous, character of the sutra. Someone going through this sutra for the first time couldn't be blamed for thinking that it was a sort of rag bag - a transcendental rag bag of course, a rag bag containing bits and pieces of wonderful jewelled brocade - but it's still a rag bag.

But nevertheless the Sutra is a whole. It does all hang together, it does possess a spiritual unity of its own. Broadly speaking the nineteen chapters can be classified into three groups. The first group consists simply of chapter three, that is to say the chapter on confession. And that as we have seen is the original nucleus of the sutra. The second group consists of all those chapters in which gods and goddesses come forward and promise to protect the sutra. The third group consists of all the remaining chapters. Most of these remaining chapters can be regarded as attempts on the part of the sutra to draw into its own orbit all the principal Mahayana teachings, or all the different kinds of Buddhist scriptures. For instance, chapter two deals with the measure of life of the Tathagatha, and this is one of the two major themes of the *White Lotus Sutra*. Chapter five is concerned with *sunyata*, and *sunyata* is treated at length in the *Sutras of Perfect Wisdom*, of which there are more than thirty, some very lengthy indeed.

Now in this series of lectures we shall be concerned mainly with material contained in the first and the second groups. And these chapters, the chapters in the first and the second groups, contain what is in a way distinctive to the sutra, contain its special teaching. The first group, consisting of chapter three, the chapter of confession, represents purification of self, or purification of life. It represents the transformation of self - purification through confession and transformation through confession. So we shall be dealing with confession and with transformation of self or transformation of life in the second and third lectures. But transformation of self, transformation of one's own life, involves transformation of the world, and this is represented by the second group of chapters, those in which the gods and goddesses come forward and promise to protect the sutra. Who these gods and goddesses are and how their promises to protect the sutra

represent a transformation of the world we shall see in the remaining lectures - that is to say, lectures 5 to 8.

But the question still remains: what is the principle of attraction that holds the sutra together, that holds these three groups of chapters together, that holds transformation of self and transformation of world together? And the answer is very simple. It's the spiritual needs of the individual, of the individual who is trying to grow, the individual who wants to transform himself. This is what has drawn together this apparently miscellaneous collection of material. It's this factor which gives it its unity, its spiritual unity.

Coming nearer home, coming closer to home, we find much the same thing happening to our own movement in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. There's a very large number of Buddhist scriptures available, but they don't all appeal to us equally. There are certain Buddhist scriptures that appeal to us very very much indeed, more than other scriptures, that seem more relevant to our needs. And it is from these that we draw on, on these that we draw, in these that we find spiritual nourishment and spiritual inspiration. So we read them, we study them, we even have special seminars devoted to them. In other words we draw them into our orbit, into the orbit of the Movement. And I could mention in this connection scriptures like the *Udana*, on which we've had two seminars, or expositions like the *Bodhicaryavatara* of Shantideva, the Introduction to the Life of Enlightenment. And there are now quite a number of these works, works that we've drawn into our orbit, into the spiritual orbit of the Movement, because we've found them especially useful and especially helpful to us in the process of our spiritual development.

And we find not only that they are all useful to us, not only that they all help us in our spiritual development. We find that they all have therefore something in common. We find therefore that they are all brought together into a whole. And what they have in common, what brings them into a whole, is of course us, our spiritual needs. Now in the course of these eight weeks, in the course of these eight lectures, we shall be drawing a new Buddhist scripture, a Buddhist scripture that is new at least to many of us, into our spiritual orbit - and that sutra is of course the *Sutra of Golden Light*. Or rather perhaps we should say we shall be allowing ourselves to be drawn into the orbit of the sutra. Tonight's lecture is the first in the series, the first of the eight, and it's inevitably been of an introductory nature - we have had to deal with various preliminaries. But from next week we shall be plunging straight into the heart of the sutra. We shall be plunging into the heart of the Golden Light, into the heart of the light that transforms the self and transforms the world.

Checked December 2000