Lecture 125: The Spiritual Significance of Confession

Mr Chairman and Friends.

In the course of the last week, my thoughts were going back to India, to the land in which I spent so very many enjoyable and useful and inspiring years, altogether some twenty years. And I recollected that at this time of year in India it's just about the end of the rainy season. In India, you probably know, there is a rainy season, there's a monsoon, which means that for three or four months you get solidly continuous heavy rain. The rain just comes down and down and down, and you can't see anything - it's just one mass, as it were, of falling grey rain - sometimes quite warm. It's rather like having a shower bath if you are out in it, not cold, not icy, as it sometimes is in this country. But the rainy season does have its disadvantages. You can't go out and about, and you can't do very much, at least not if you live in the villages, not if you live in the countryside. Underfoot there is only mud, if there isn't actually water, and in any case the rain is falling down very heavily indeed and you get soaked in a matter of minutes. But towards the end of this period, towards the end of the three or four months, the rains gradually stop, and all at once, or so it seems, the sun comes out shining in full splendour. The clouds disappear. And then all day long one can see just clear blue sky, bluer, more brilliant, more intense, than one ever sees in this country, except perhaps occasionally on the rarest of late summer days. So once more people can get out, can get about, and can do things.

So for thousands upon thousands of years, the rainy season in India, and the end of the rainy season, has affected the whole pattern of life in that country, or rather in that subcontinent, has affected of course, obviously, the whole pattern of agricultural life, but also the whole pattern of spiritual life in India as well, at least so far as the outward forms of that spiritual life are concerned. In the Buddha's day, and for some centuries afterwards, his full-time followers, that is to say the *bhikkhus*, those who had left the household life, those who had given up their ordinary occupation, those who wandered from place to place and lived upon alms, they all used to stay in one place during the rainy season. They might stay in a cave, they might stay in a wayside shrine, a shrine dedicated to some local gods, or they might even stay in a shed in somebody's garden or in somebody's park. They might even, so we are told, in some cases spend the rainy season in a hollow tree. But later simple buildings were put up for the use of the *bhikkhus*, for the use of the full-time followers of the Buddha, by the lay supporters who continued to live at home. And these simple buildings, these simple shelters, these retreats for the rainy season, these became eventually what we usually refer to as monasteries.

And during the rainy season, during the rainy season retreat, as it came to be called, the monks, the *bhikkhus*, the full-timers, they spent their time in various ways. Some of them remained immersed much of the time in meditation. Some of them again repeated to one another what they knew of the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching, what they remembered of the Dharma, because one mustn't forget that in those days the Dharma, Buddhism, was an entirely oral tradition. And some of the monks again attended to more as it were homely tasks, if one can use the word 'homely' in connection with monks. They mended their robes, they patched their robes, they washed their robes, and they dyed them afresh. This is what they used to do during the rainy season. And then, at the end of the rainy season, at the end of those three or four months of virtual retreat, of staying in one place in this way, at the end of that period, they'd set off, they'd set out on their wanderings again. Some of them might go singly, alone, others might go in twos and in threes, and sometimes they even went in small bands, walking, wandering from place to place, village to village, even city to city.

The Buddha himself, we are told, usually was accompanied by one other monk, one other *bhikkhu*, especially towards the end of his life. The records, the traditions, tell us that the Buddha tried, as it were, quite a few monks or *bhikkhus* as companions, but he found them one and all unsatisfactory, or at least not quite satisfactory. It wasn't very easy to live up to the Buddha's standards. But eventually the Buddha had the good fortune to find Ananda, the famous, the well-known, the much-loved Ananda, and Ananda proved to be the perfect companion for the Buddha in every way. And he remained with the Buddha as his constant companion for some twenty years - until, that is to say, the Pari*nirvana*, the final passing away of the Buddha himself.

Now having set out on their wanderings, the monks, the *bhikkhus*, and the Buddha wandered from place to place all over northern India, especially northeastern India. For the remainder of the year they were on the

move, and, of course, on foot. They wandered for the remainder of the year right round until the beginning of the next rainy season. So during that period, if one was wandering, or while one was wandering, one might not usually or very often see very much of the other monks, the other *bhikkhus*, who also were wandering. After all even northern India, even northeastern India, is a very big place. Even the area in which the Buddha is known normally to have wandered is equivalent to the extent of Great Britain itself. And the Buddha and his *bhikkhus*, his monks, his full-timers, wandered over that quite big area on foot. If one was wandering alone, singly, one might go for many days without seeing any other monk.

But twice a month, wherever they might be, wherever they might find themselves in the course of the wanderings, all the monks in a given area would gather together, would meet together, and they'd meet together in the first place on the full moon day or rather the night of the full moon day, and also on the night of the new moon day. And they'd meet together whenever they possibly could in large numbers. There might even be a thousand or more of them, especially if the Buddha himself was present in that particular area, present at that particular meeting, that particular assembly. And what would they do when they met together on the night of the full moon, on the night of the new moon? According to the traditions, especially to the records which now make up the Pali Canon, they would meditate together. You might have a hundred or you might have a thousand or twelve hundred and fifty monks, *bhikkhus*, around the Buddha, and all meditating together - and usually out in the open air, in a forest clearing, in the light of the full moon, all meditating together. And then they would not only meditate together in this way. They would chant what are called Dharma verses together, they would chant together, they would rehearse together verses in which the Buddha's teaching, the Buddha's Dharma, had been summarised either by the Buddha himself or by one or another of his disciples who happened to be poetically gifted.

So this is what happened during the Buddha's lifetime as far as we can reconstruct events. This is what happened on the night of the full moon, the night of the new moon, that the monks, the wandering monks, would come together, gather together, would meditate together, and would chant the Dharma verses to refresh as it were their recollection of the teaching, to give them as it were something on which to reflect, something on which to meditate. But after the Buddha's Pari*nirvana*, after the Buddha's final passing away from the world, it seems a change took place. For a while the monks continued to wander, they continued to meet twice a month on the full moon night, on the new moon night, but it seems for some reason or other they no longer meditated together, they no longer chanted the Dharma verses. Instead they did something else - and what was that? They confessed any offences which they might have committed since the last meeting, that is to say, offences against the monastic code, which by this time had come into existence in a comparatively fully fledged form. And these offences which they confessed were then dealt with by the assembled Order, or rather by the assembled chapter of the Order.

Later still another change took place. The monks, the *bhikkhus*, no longer confessed offences during the actual meeting, during the actual full moon night meeting or new moon night meeting; they confessed beforehand. And how did they do this? They confessed in twos, they got together before the actual main meeting in pairs, and one would confess to the other. The custom was, the practice was, that whoever was senior, that is to say senior in monastic terms, who'd been a *bhikkhu*, a full-time follower of the Buddha, for a longer time, he would confess first to his junior, and then the junior would confess to the senior. So confessions were made in this way, by pairs of monks sitting together before the actual meeting. So in the actual meeting itself, the monastic code was simply recited by the monk, by the *bhikkhu*, appointed for the purpose. Since they'd already confessed in private, they remained silent.

So this kind of confessional meeting is still the practice, still the rule, in many parts of the Buddhist world today, especially in those which follow the Theravada tradition. But other forms of confession are also widely practised. For instance, the pupil, the disciple, confesses to the teacher. The general practice is that one confesses at the end of each day, that is to say, when you are actually living with your teacher under the same roof. The practice is, or the custom is, that the pupil, the disciple, goes to the teacher at the end of the day, bows down, and asks forgiveness for any offences which he might have committed against the teacher himself in the course of the day, whether the offence was of body or speech or mind. For instance, in the course of the day, the pupil, the disciple, might possibly have had an angry thought against his teacher. He might not have quite liked something that the teacher said and just for a moment he was caught as it were unawares and an angry thought flashed across his mind. Well, he's got to confess it that night, he mustn't as it were sleep on

it, he's got to bring it out into the open and say, 'This is what happened. I felt anger. I'm sorry, please forgive me.' And in this way, if this practice is kept up, then a positive and open relationship between pupil and teacher is maintained. Then again there are verses of confession, special verses of confession, which are chanted as part of the regular puja or worship in the shrine, in the temple. And this is done in all parts of the Buddhist world. And in the Mahayana tradition, the tradition of the Great Way, such verses are particularly long and beautiful and elaborate, and sometimes they're taken from the *Sutra of Golden Light*.

Now confession is of importance not only for the monks, the *bhikkhus*, but for lay people too. And we see that this was so even in the time of the Buddha. There's the very well-known story of Ajatasatru, the king of Magadha. Ajatasatru had become king of Magadha in the way in which kings in those days very often used to become king, succeed to the throne. He'd become king by murdering his father Bimbisara, the previous king, who was an old friend and disciple of the Buddha. But Ajatasatru felt very uneasy in his mind, he couldn't rest, he couldn't sleep. So one night, we are told, one full moon night, he went to the Buddha. The Buddha was staying with twelve hundred and fifty disciples in the middle of the forest. He went to the Buddha and he confessed, he confessed what he had done. He confessed that evil had overcome him, and he had killed his own father for the sake of the throne. So the Buddha heard and the Buddha accepted the confession. He preached the Dharma. But after preaching the Dharma - and Ajatasatru heard the Dharma - the Buddha remarked that had the king not committed that murder, that very serious offence, then, on hearing the Dharma, he would have developed the higher spiritual vision. But since he had committed so serious and terrible an offence, even though he heard the Dharma, even though he was receptive, that higher spiritual vision did not, could not, arise.

So from these few examples, taken almost at random, we can see that confession occupies a very important place in Buddhist monastic life, in fact a very important place in Buddhism, in the Dharma, generally. The value of confession is in fact also recognised in other spiritual traditions as well, for instance in the Roman Catholic church. But one must say, in fact one must hasten to say, that in the case of the Roman Catholic church, the practice of confession, auricular confession as it is called, has certain undesirable aspects. Only too often it encourages, indeed even plays upon, irrational feelings of guilt. We may be able to go into this a little later on. The value of confession is also recognised by modern psychotherapy, especially by psycho-analysis, but that recognition is accorded - as it were, confession takes place - within a theoretic framework, the theoretic framework of psychoanalysis, which is secular and humanistic, not to say scientific and rationalistic, with the possible exception to some extent of those who follow the Jungian school. The value and significance of confession for psychoanalysis therefore is strictly limited.

Now tonight we are concerned with the spiritual significance of confession as illustrated by the *Sutra of Golden Light* - that is to say, we are concerned with the significance of confession for the spiritual development of the individual, we are concerned with the part played by confession in the transformation, in the total transformation, of the individual life and the individual consciousness. But before going into this, I want to clear up a certain misunderstanding. It's a misunderstanding with regard to the use of the word 'spiritual', or rather, I should say, with regard to my use of the word 'spiritual'. Some of our friends, some of our very good friends, wonder why I use this word 'spiritual' at all. They seem to think that we would be better off without it. Some of them even argue that there's no difference between the word 'psychological' and the word 'spiritual', and they maintain that the word 'psychological' would therefore convey what I wanted to say just as well as, if not better than, the word 'spiritual'. For instance, they say, these friends of ours, that there's no point in speaking of a spiritual experience. After all, spiritual experiences of whatever kind pertain to the mind, pertain to the psyche, not to the body, so one might just as well speak of a psychological experience. However, I must say straight away that I don't agree with this line of thought at all, and I distinguish, and in fact distinguish quite sharply, between spiritual and psychological. And I do this because I think it's helpful, indeed necessary, to do so. I also sometimes distinguish between psychological and transcendental. So I want to begin by saying a few words about each of these three terms, and it may then be clear what I mean when I speak specifically of the spiritual significance of confession.

So first of all, 'psychological'. The word psychological is used in the sense of 'that which pertains to or even belongs to the psyche or the mind'. Strictly speaking, though, the word means 'what pertains to or belongs to the science of the mind'. Psychology is really the science of the mind. The word that we should use instead is 'psychical' - we ought to say psychical state and not psychological state. However, the usage 'psychological'

instead of 'psychical' is well established, so I'm not going to quarrel with that. Now what we mean by psychological clearly depends on what we mean by psyche. Psyche is mind or even soul in the popular sense. But what is mind? I'm not asking this question in any deep philosophic sense, not for the purposes of this lecture. I mean 'What is mind?' in the sense in which the term is used by ordinary people, the people with whom we are trying to communicate, the people for whose benefit, indeed, we distinguish between 'psychological' and 'spiritual'. As used by them, as used by ordinary people, the word indicates that part of ourselves which is different from the body, which consists of all sorts of mental states and mental processes, which is the seat as it were of thoughts, feelings, impulses. Thoughts about job, home, money, politics. Feelings of love, hate, jealousy, fear, anxiety. Impulses to pursue what is pleasant, avoid what is unpleasant. So 'mind' to them indicates the sum total of all these things, so that when you use the word psychological, people naturally think that it pertains to or indicates something belonging to the psyche or mind in that sense - in other words, to mind as they themselves experience it, as they themselves know it.

Suppose, therefore, you say, as some of our friends would like me to say, that Enlightenment is a psychological experience. People will then think that it's a mental state or a mental process of the type with which they themselves are familiar. In other words, they'll misunderstand completely. One therefore has to say that Enlightenment is a spiritual experience - in other words, that it is an experience of a type with which they are not familiar, of which they have indeed no conception. There's then less danger of misunderstanding. If you use the word spiritual rather than psychological, people will at least realise that you're talking about something that does not fall within their present range of experience, that you are in fact talking about a higher level of consciousness, though you might of course also have to explain what is meant by a higher level of consciousness, what is meant, in fact, by levels of consciousness. Now there are many higher levels of consciousness accessible to us, accessible to man. According to Buddhist terminology, above, beyond, our ordinary, everyday consciousness there are what are called the four *dhyanas*, the four superconscious states of the world of form, each succeeding one higher than the last. And then above them, beyond them, there are what are known as the four formless *dhyanas*, the four formless superconscious states; and beyond all of them, *nirvana* or Enlightenment.

So sometimes we use, or rather I use, the word spiritual in a very broad general sense, and sometimes in a narrower, more specific sense. In the broad general sense, spiritual refers to all eight *dhyanas*, four of the world of form, four of the formless world, and *nirvana*, the state of Enlightenment. But used in the narrower, more specific sense, it refers only to the dhyanic, not to the nirvanic level of experience. Now when I use the word spiritual in the second sense, that is to say the narrower, more restricted sense, then I use a different term to refer to *nirvana*, or to refer to the state of Enlightenment; and that word is 'transcendental'. And I use it as the equivalent of the Pali and Sanskrit *lokottara. Lokottara* literally means 'beyond the world', sometimes translated as 'the trans-mundane' or as 'the hypercosmic'. So we therefore have three terms. First of all we've got psychological, which means 'pertaining to ordinary human consciousness', ordinary human mental states and processes such as every one of us experiences. And then we've got the word spiritual, which means 'pertaining to the higher dhyanic levels of consciousness', pertaining to experiences on those levels. And then we've got, thirdly and lastly, the term transcendental, which means pertaining to *nirvana*, pertaining to Enlightenment, pertaining to ultimate reality.

So we can now perhaps appreciate the full force of such expressions as spiritual practice, spiritual life, spiritual path, or spiritual ideal. I don't personally use these terms in a vague, woolly sort of way. Spiritual practice is that practice which is aimed at, or which is conducive to, a state of consciousness higher than ordinary, higher than we usually experience, directed to a dhyanic state or even, if the word is used in the broader sense, to the state of Enlightenment itself. And the spiritual life is the life which is so organised, which in fact is systematically organised, to make possible the attainment of higher states of consciousness, also which expresses higher states of consciousness. The meaning of the rest of such expressions you can no doubt work out for yourselves.

So perhaps we now have a clearer idea of what is meant by the spiritual significance of confession. It means that confession has significance for the individual's attainment of higher levels of consciousness, whether those be the *dhyanas* or even the state of Enlightenment itself. It means that confession plays an important part, an important role, in the transformation of the individual, in what we may describe as the shift of the centre of gravity of the individual's being from the psychological to the spiritual and from the spiritual to the

transcendental. So it's confession in this sense that is illustrated in the *Sutra of Golden Light*, illustrated especially, as we saw last week, in chapter three of the *Sutra of Golden Light*, in which occur the celebrated verses of confession.

Those who were present last week may remember that at the beginning of this chapter, chapter three, the Bodhisattva Ruchiraketu falls asleep. And later, when he relates the dream that he had while asleep to the Buddha, he says that he fell asleep one night when he was not tired. So this should give us a hint, this should give us a clue that the dream is no ordinary dream. In the dream he sees a golden drum, a drum that radiates golden light throughout the whole of space. And he sees innumerable Buddhas sitting on thrones of beryl (a green precious stone) at the foot of wonderful jewel trees, at the head of assemblies of many hundreds of thousands. And these Buddhas also, so he sees in his dream, fill the whole of space. And he further sees a man in the form of a Brahmin beating the drum. And while the drum is being beaten, a series of verses come forth. Well, last week we dealt with what Ruchiraketu saw in his dream and tried to give some hint, some pointer, to its significance. But tonight we are concerned with the confessional verses which he heard, verses which were, which are, not only sound but light, which are the golden light, the light that transforms the individual life, transforms the self and transforms the world.

Now last week we saw that these verses could be divided into ten sections. Three out of these ten sections are confessions of faults or confessions of evil, and confession in this sense is the principal subject of the verses, so we'll be dealing with it at some length. But before that I want to say something about the prayer for the progress of all sentient beings and the Bodhisattva Vow - these make up the first and second sections of the verses - and afterwards, that is to say after dealing with the confession of faults or confession of evil, I want to say just a little about rejoicing in merits and praises of the Buddha, which constitute the sixth and eight and part of the ninth sections of these confessional verses.

Now I've described the first section of the verses as a prayer, but this is a very provisional description indeed. What I've called the prayer is in fact just the sound of the drum. It's in fact the golden light of the drum, and more than that, it's the effect of the sound, the effect of the light - in other words, the effect which they have, which the sound and the light have, on all sentient beings - which is of course beneficent. In other words, Ruchiraketu in his dream not only hears a prayer that by virtue of the drum of golden light all beings may progress. He sees in his dream, he actually sees the golden light helping them to progress. So here we may say that the medium is in truth the message. The prayer of the drum, the prayer of the golden light, is as it were self-fulfilling. We mustn't forget that, as we saw last week, the golden drum is the Absolute, the golden drum is the Buddha, as well as being Ruchiraketu himself - that is to say, the new Ruchiraketu - and the golden drum is also the sutra. So what Ruchiraketu hears in this opening section of the confession is not just a pious wish that all sentient beings may progress. What he sees and hears is a sort of cosmic drama. It's the drama of the effect of the golden light of the transcendental on the darkness of the mundane.

He has as it were in his dream a sort of spiritual vision. On the one hand there is the golden light, the great golden light which is the light of truth, the light of reality, the light of the Buddha; and on the other hand, there is the darkness, the darkness of ignorance, the darkness of confusion and bewilderment, the darkness of defilement and passion. And he sees, Ruchiraketu sees, that darkness is struggling to overcome the light; and the light is struggling, as it were, to overcome the darkness. And he sees in his dream that the light is winning. He not only hears the prayer that, in the words of the verses themselves, 'The woes of the triple thousand world may be suppressed', he sees that in the case of certain individuals at least woes actually are being suppressed. He not only hears the prayer that beings may be without fear, he sees some of them becoming free from fear; and in the same way he sees beings gaining Enlightenment. He sees them teaching the Dharma. He sees them destroying greed, hate, and delusion. Moreover, he sees beings paying homage to the Buddha, worshipping the Buddha, sees them recollecting the Buddha, remembering the Buddha, meeting the Buddha, sees them performing skilful action, sees the fires of hell being quenched, see all woes beings quenched, all woes being suppressed. In other words, Ruchiraketu has a vision of the whole world being transformed. He sees darkness being overcome. He sees the golden light triumphant.

So what is his response to this? He too feels the effect of the golden light. He too wants to be transformed. And not only that, he wants to co-operate with the golden light in its work of transforming the world, wants to co-operate in the work of helping sentient beings to progress. So what does he do? What does he say? He says, 'And may I be for those who are without deliverance, without rescue, without refuge, the deliverer, the

refuge, the excellent protector.' In other words, the Bodhicitta, or will to Enlightenment, arises, and he takes or he makes the Bodhisattva Vow, that is to say, the vow to attain supreme Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Now there's an important point to be made here. The Bodhicitta, the will to Enlightenment, or thought of Enlightenment, as it's sometimes translated (though not very correctly) - the Bodhicitta, the will to Enlightenment, is transcendental. It's not a product of the mundane consciousness, of the mundane individuality. One cannot therefore really speak of 'my Bodhicitta' or 'your Bodhicitta'. It's not an individual possession. In fact, there is only one Bodhicitta, just as there is in reality only one Bodhisattva and one Buddha. But that one bodhicitta manifests through different individuals, manifests through those that make themselves receptive to it.

And this is what has happened in the case of Ruchiraketu. He's made himself receptive to the bodhicitta, receptive to the golden light. So the Bodhicitta manifests through him, the golden light works through him, and he is now a real Bodhisattva. So what does a real Bodhisattva do? He practises the Six Paramitas, the Six Perfections: generosity, ethics, patience, vigour, meditation, and wisdom. He works on himself; he does his best to help others. But then, unfortunately, what usually happens? Indeed, we may even say, what always happens? He comes up against obstacles, obstacles within himself. He encounters inner resistance. He becomes aware of many weaknesses and many faults, becomes aware of much within him that is actually evil. He becomes aware of the darkness within him. And this darkness resists the influence of the Bodhicitta, this darkness struggles against the golden light. So when that happens what should the Bodhisattva do? What can he do?

Well, he confesses. He confesses his faults. He confesses the evil that is within him. So this is what Ruchiraketu does, he confesses. And the verses which come forth are verses of confession. Now Ruchiraketu's experience is surely very much our own, even though our experience may be on a lower level and on a more restricted scale. We too perhaps have seen the workings of the golden light in the world, or at least in our corner of the world, and we too have been attracted by that light, have felt the effect of that light. We too have wanted to co-operate with it, to make ourselves receptive to it, to allow it to work through us. So we too have breathed forth our individual aspirations. We may not have actually taken the Bodhisattva Vow, but we've at least resolved to work on ourselves and do our best to help others in whatever way we can. But then what happens? We too encounter obstacles, obstacles within ourselves. We too encounter inner resistance, perhaps far stronger and more terrible than anything Ruchiraketu experienced. So what do we do? What can we do? Well, to begin with at least, we too simply confess.

Now, the word for confession in both Pali and Sanskrit is *desana. Desana* means 'pointing out', 'indicating', 'explaining', 'expounding', as in *dharma desana*, which means the pointing out of the Dharma, the explaining of the Dharma, the expounding of the Dharma. So in the same way you get *papa desana*, pointing out one's own faults, acknowledging one's own faults, making known one's own faults. *Papa*, incidentally, is often rendered as 'sin', but I prefer to avoid this term on account of its Christian theological connotations. Faults, however, for *papa*, is rather weak. Evil is probably the best equivalent. So *papa desana* is therefore a pointing out, an acknowledgement of the evil within one. It is a confession of evil. But none of these expressions really does justice to one's actual spiritual experience at this stage, so let us go into the matter just a little more deeply.

You come into contact with the golden light. You absorb something of the golden light. Something of the golden light enters into your system. So the golden light, one may say, is a sort of spiritual food, it's a sort of spiritual nutriment. In fact, it's the most concentrated and powerful kind of spiritual food one could possibly imagine. More than that, it's also a spiritual medicine. How is that? When it enters, when the golden light enters into one's system, it encounters all sorts of other things that we have taken in, all sorts of other things that we have produced. In other words, it encounters various unskilful mental states, various unwholesome mental states. It encounters greed, encounters hate, encounters delusion, encounters wrong views. So what happens?

Well, of course, there's a struggle between the golden light and our unskilful mental states. There's a struggle between the golden light and all the poison that is in our system, and each tries to throw the other out, out of

our system. Sometimes, unfortunately, the unskilful states win, they succeed in expelling the golden light, and that means an end to our spiritual life, at least for the time being. But this, happily, very rarely happens. Once you have taken in, really taken in, even a little of the golden light, it's very difficult to get rid of it. You're stuck with it. So usually the golden light succeeds in expelling the unskilful mental states, succeeds in throwing out, even throwing up, the poison. So the golden light is not just a spiritual food. It's not even just a spiritual medicine. One can say that the golden light is a spiritual emetic, even a transcendental emetic. It's something which once you've taken it compels you to vomit up all the evil that is in your system.

And it's in this vomiting up of all our mental and emotional poisons that the confession of evil really consists. It's not just a verbal acknowledgement, it's much more than a verbal acknowledgement, even though it is of course accompanied by a verbal acknowledgement, a verbal expression. The confession of evil is an actual revulsion from evil, an actual rejection of it. When we vomit physically, our stomach turns upside down, it turns over, and there's an upheaval, there's a convulsion. And it's much the same when we confess, truly confess. There's a spiritual upheaval, a spiritual convulsion, and then up comes the poison, and we spew it out. I hope this way of putting things will not offend the sensibilities of the more refined members of the audience. The truth of the matter is that confession can be a painful and unpleasant process, a process in which you may feel that you're spewing up not only the evil that is in you but your blood and guts as well.

Now that we have some idea of what confession really involves, we are in a better position to consider it in detail. So we are going to consider: 1) Who confesses? 2) To whom? 3) What? 4) When? 5) How? 6) The effects of confession. These headings are not exhaustive, but they'll help us in dealing with a complex and many-sided subject. And of course throughout we are concerned with the spiritual significance of confession as illustrated in the *Sutra of Golden Light*.

So first, who confesses? In the Sutra, of course, it's Ruchiraketu who confesses, or rather the drum, the golden drum, that provides Ruchiraketu with a model confession. But what does Ruchiraketu represent? Who is Ruchiraketu? Ruchiraketu is the individual, that is to say the true individual, or one who is trying to be a true individual. And a true individual is one who has developed self-consciousness, that is to say reflexive consciousness, who is not only aware, but aware that he is aware; also one who is emotionally positive - who is full of friendliness, joy, compassion, equanimity, who has a profound and heart-felt faith, faith in the transcendental, who experiences deep reverence and devotion. The individual, moreover, is one whose energies are free and flowing, whose energies are not blocked, whose energies are unified. The individual, therefore, is one who is spontaneous. At the same time, the individual is one who is responsible. He's aware of the consequences of his actions, both for self and others, and he acts in accordance with this awareness. But above all, perhaps, the individual is one who is not a member of the group - maybe technically a member, outwardly a member, but does not really belong to the group. He thinks, feels, acts for himself. He's not emotionally dependent on the group's approval.

So confession is made by one who is an individual, or one who is trying to be an individual. And he confesses because he wants to develop spiritually, wants to be transformed, because he wants to get rid of all that stands between him and the realisation of his ideal. He does not confess because he wants to be received back into the favour of the group. It's very difficult to be an individual. It's very difficult to live without the approval of the group, the group to which one belongs, naturally belongs. And it's still more difficult to live with the actual expressed or even implied disapproval of the group. And sometimes people will go almost to any lengths to be reconciled to the group to which they belong. They will say anything the group wants them to say. They'll even confess to crimes that they have not committed. And we've seen quite a lot of this sort of thing in recent times, especially in the political life of certain totalitarian states. And sometimes such people, wretched unfortunate people, actually believe their own false confessions. After all, the group must be right. So this sort of confession is very different from the one with which we are dealing now. Here it is the individual who confesses, and he confesses because he wants to develop as an individual, because he wants to be transformed. He does not confess because he cannot live without the approval of the group. So it's the individual who confesses.

Then second: to whom confession is made. Confession is made to other individuals, especially to those who are individuals *par excellence*, and more than individuals - that is to say, to the Buddhas and the great Bodhisattvas. In other words, confession is made to members of the spiritual community; in fact, it can only

be made to members of the spiritual community. We could even say that confession is possible only within the spiritual community. The person confessing, the individual confessing, must be a member of the spiritual community, and those to whom confession is made must also be members of the spiritual community. They must all share the same spiritual ideals, even in some cases embody those ideals in varying degrees. They must share the same spiritual commitment; otherwise there's no confession, no confession in the spiritual sense.

Now I've said that one confesses especially to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and Ruchiraketu in the sutra confesses in the presence of all the Buddhas - and the key word here is 'presence'. Ruchiraketu saw the Buddhas, he heard the Buddhas, so he was able to confess to them. And when we recite the Sevenfold Puja, we confess as it were to the Buddha, but rarely if ever do we have a vivid sense of the Buddha's actual presence, so this is not confession in the full sense. Full confession requires that we should confess specific offences that we've actually committed, including committed in thought, and that we should confess them to another member, or other members, of the spiritual community of whose presence we are actually conscious. Moreover, it requires that they should be conscious of us, should hear our confession and accept it. In other words, confession involves genuine communication. And for most people, most individuals, this means that we have to confess to individuals with whom we are in actual physical contact, people who are committed to the same way that we are committed to - that is to say, our *kalyana mitras*, fellow members of the Order, or our teacher.

Suppose we confess just to an ordinary friend, that is to say a friend with a small F, a friend who does not share our spiritual ideals. Suppose for instance you confess that you got a bit drunk last weekend, or that you missed your meditation recently for a whole week. Well, an ordinary friend will not be able to understand what you say, won't be able to understand what those things mean to you, won't be able to understand your distress, may even tell you that you're just upsetting yourself quite unnecessarily. So there will be no real communication, and therefore no real confession. You will not have been able to vomit out the evil, you will not have been able to get rid of it. But suppose you confess to spiritual friends, suppose you confess to the spiritual community, confess within the spiritual community; then there's quite a different situation, quite a different experience. Spiritual friends know what you are talking about, and they'll be concerned, though not worried. They'll sympathise with your distress, there will be a real communication, therefore a genuine confession, and you will be able to reject the evil that is in you. So one confesses to other individuals, to members of the spiritual community.

Third: what is confessed? Well, that's very easily answered: everything. Everything that is holding us back, everything that prevents us from developing, prevents us from gaining Enlightenment. But this of course is by no means easy. Someone once remarked that when you started writing or trying to write your autobiography, the first thing of which you became aware was all the things that you were not going to tell. So in the same way, there are some things that we find it very difficult to confess, even for a while quite impossible to confess. And this is because genuine confession is a very powerful thing. To confess something, really to confess something, is to give it up, not just verbally but in actual fact. Consequently, if we're unwilling to confess something, it really means we're unable to give it up. And to the extent that we do not confess the evil that is in us, the evil that we've done, to that extent we do not grow, do not develop. It means that we're hanging on to the past, hanging on to the old self, refusing to die. So Ruchiraketu's confession is very comprehensive indeed, and as far as we can tell he doesn't leave anything out, he doesn't hold anything back. And as I've mentioned before, his confession comprises three out of the ten sections of verses which come forth from the drum of golden light in his dream. I'm going to read the first of these three sections. It will give you a good idea of what is to be confessed.

'And whatever evil, cruel act was done by me previously, I will confess it all before the Buddhas. Whatever evil I have done by not attending to my parents, by neglecting the Buddhas, by neglecting the good; whatever evil I have done by being drunk with the intoxication of authority or with the intoxication of high birth or by being drunk with the intoxication of tender age; whatever evil I have done, bad thought, bad word, by a mind dark with ignorance, under the influence of an evil friend or by a mind distracted by impurities, under the compulsion of sport or enjoyment, or through the influence of anxiety or anger, or through the fault of unsatisfied wealth; whatever evil I have done by my associations with ignoble people, by reason of envy and greed, or by the fault of guile or wretchedness; whatever evil I have done through failure to gain the mastery over my desires by reason of fear at the time of approaching troubles; whatever evil I have done through the

influence of a flighty mind or through the influence of passion and anger or through being oppressed by hunger and thirst; whatever evil I have done for the sake of drink and food, for the sake of clothing, for a reason involving women, through the various afflictions of impurities; whatever evil of body, tongue and mind, bad action accumulated in threefold manner, I have done, together with similar things, I confess it all. Whatever disrespect I have shown towards Pratyekabuddhas or towards Bodhisattvas, I confess it all. If I have shown disrespect towards those who preach the Good Law or towards other meritorious beings, I confess it all. If I have unawares continually rejected the Good Law or shown disrespect towards my parents, I confess it all. Whatever evil I have done through stupidity or from folly or through being full of pride and arrogance, through passion, hatred or delusion, I confess it all.'

So this is Ruchiraketu's first confession. In this first section of the verses, and in the second of the three sections devoted to such confession, Ruchiraketu confesses to committing the ten unskilful acts, that is to say three of body, four of speech, three of mind. And in the third and last section, he confesses the evil which has been heaped up by him in various oppressions. He mentions, for instance, the oppression of passion, the oppression of time, even the oppression of gaining merits. And there's much that could be said about this interesting expression 'oppression', but we've no time. We must pass on, pass on to four: when one confesses.

Well, ideally one confesses now, one confesses as soon as one has committed the offence, or as soon as one becomes aware that one has committed evil, as soon as one becomes aware that there is evil within one or as soon as one can get hold of one's spiritual friends. In other words, one should confess as soon as possible. The longer you delay, the longer you hold back, the longer you come to a standstill in your spiritual life and your spiritual progress. At the same time, the fact that one confesses now does not mean that one confesses once and for all. Offences, unfortunately, are always being committed, at least in the mind, and until Enlightenment has been gained, there is always some evil in us of which we've got to get rid. One should therefore, according to the Mahayana teaching, confess all the time. Confession should be a regular, an integral part of spiritual life.

Fifthly: how one confesses. And I'm going to say now something that may surprise some of you. One confesses without any feeling of guilt. And now I'm going to say something that may surprise you still more. So long as you experience a feeling of guilt, no genuine confession is possible - in other words, so long as you experience a feeling of irrational guilt, not to say neurotic guilt. This does not mean that you will not experience regret, even very intense regret, that you will not feel very very sorry, even very deeply ashamed of what you've done, ashamed of yourself for doing it, even angry with yourself for doing it - but you will not feel guilty. So what is guilt? It's not very easy to say. Guilt is quite a complex phenomenon, and it's significant perhaps that the etymology of the word (and it's an Anglo-Saxon word) is unknown. But this phenomenon, this experience of guilt, so common, so pervasive in our Western civilisation and culture, can be analysed into at least three main factors. First, there's the consciousness of having done wrong. In other words, you've done something which somebody else did not want you to do. It may not be something which you yourself think wrong at all, but somebody else doesn't want you to do it, and you have this consciousness of guilt that you've done something wrong in the sense of something which somebody else did not want you to do.

The second factor is that there's fear of punishment. If you've actually done something wrong, there's the fear of being punished when you are found out, and if you've not actually done the something wrong, there's the fear of punishment if you were to do it, if you were found out. So there's not only the fear of punishment, there's the fear of being found out, and the fear of being found out leads to all sorts of other complications. It leads to secrecy, to concealment, to deceit, to falsehood, to hypocrisy, to evasiveness, to withdrawal, to blocked communication, and so on. And in addition there's the discomfort and frustration, sometimes very acute, of not being able freely to do what you want to do, to say nothing of the resentment you feel.

But this is by no means all. We've still not fathomed the essential nature of guilt. There's still a third factor, and this is perhaps the most important one of all. The person who does not want you to do something is someone you love, someone who loves you, someone to whom you are strongly, possessively, even violently attached, someone on whom you are emotionally dependent, without whose love you feel you cannot live. So if you do what they don't want you to do, which is what you want to do, they will not only punish you; they will be angry with you, which means they will withdraw their love from you, withdraw the love you need. In other words, they'll virtually condemn you to death, and this will be the most terrible of all punishments.

Now we could say a lot more on the subject of guilt. There is for example the element of inner conflict, also the element of self- punishment. We punish ourselves sometimes in order to forestall punishment and thus prevent the loss of love. But perhaps I've said enough to give you some idea of what guilt is like. We may say that guilt is the painful consciousness of having done, or even wanted to do, what will forfeit us the love of the person on whom we are emotionally dependent. And guilt of course arises very early in life, even very early in childhood, and the person whose love we're usually afraid of losing is of course mother. I need not enlarge on this horrendous topic. All of us have suffered from it to some extent, and many indeed are still suffering.

Even this, however, is by no means the whole story. Guilt also plays a very important part in Western religious life, that is to say Judaeo- Christian religious life. After all, God is a person, and the religious person loves God, or at least he tries to love God. He's been told that God loves him. But there are all sorts of things that God does not want him to do, things which in fact make God angry. But he himself wants to do those things, perhaps he's actually done some of them, so he feels guilty, he feels that he's offended God, he feels that God does not love him any more. He may even feel that God hates him, and he may then start hating God, and this will make him feel more guilty than ever. So in the light of some of the things I've said earlier, we can see now that there's a definite connection between feeling guilty and not being an individual. A true individual is not emotionally dependent. A true individual cannot therefore feel guilty.

Now there's also a connection between being emotionally dependent on the love of a person and being dependent on the approval of a group. And these two things come together in the case of the Roman Catholic church. In confession as practised in the Roman Catholic church, one confesses one's sins, one confesses one's sins against the law of God. And one confesses out of a sense of guilt, confesses out of fear of punishment, because one believes that if one dies with a mortal sin unconfessed and unabsolved, one will go straight to hell for ever. Not only that. One confesses to a priest, and the priest represents in effect the church, and the church of course is the group to which you belong, so that in sinning, in transgressing the law of God, you've not only incurred the wrath of God, you've also incurred the disapproval of the group, particularly as represented by the priest. Sometimes, indeed, you're even more afraid of the priest than you are of God. So leaving aside God, even forgetting about God, you can see that the church and the priest are in a very strong position *vis-à-vis* the individual believer, that is to say the church member - in a position of control, that is to say, in the position of mother in relation to child. And this is why in the beginning of tonight's lecture I said that confession in the Roman Catholic church has many undesirable aspects. Such confession may sometimes have a certain limited psychological value - at least it's a bit of a safety valve - but it has no spiritual significance from the Buddhist point of view at all.

In Bombay many years ago I knew an Indian Catholic priest, a middle-aged man, a very learned man, a great scholar, knew many languages. And at the time when I knew him, he was beginning to rebel against the church, against the Roman Catholic church to which he belonged, of which he was a priest, beginning to rebel against what he sometimes called to his non-Christian friends the 'Roman racket'. One day I happened to meet him, and it was Christmas Day, and he seemed very upset. So I knew him well enough, so I asked him 'What's the matter, father?' So he said, he told me, he spent the whole of Christmas Eve hearing confessions. And he said, 'I feel absolutely sickened.' It wasn't that anyone had had anything very terrible or even very interesting to confess. It was just the usual small dishonesties and small impurities. What had sickened him was the atmosphere of fear and guilt with which he had been in contact. What had sickened him was the desperate need of people to escape punishment, to creep back into the favour of God. What had sickened him was their readiness to grovel and their relief at being let off with a few Pater Nosters and a few Ave Marias.

Now you'll never find genuine confession sickening. You'll never find Buddhist confession, you'll never find Hinayana, Mahayana, or Vajrayana confession sickening. On the contrary, you will find it inspiring. And why is this? Because that confession is made without any feeling of guilt. In fact, as I said, it cannot be made so long as there is any feeling of guilt. After all, you are confessing to the Buddha, and the Buddha does not get angry, the Buddha does not punish. If you've committed an unskilful action, you will of course have to suffer the consequences, and they may be very unpleasant consequences, but you'll suffer those consequences under the operation of the law of karma. They're not brought about by the Buddha. The Buddha has nothing to do with them. The Buddha indeed would like to show you the way of making the law of karma operate to your benefit. He'd like to show you how to go beyond the law of karma altogether. And it's much the same when

one confesses to the spiritual community, or within the spiritual community. There's no question of any punishment. There's regret, even sorrow that you have committed an offence, that you've gone against what you and the rest of the spiritual community recognise as your own best interest, as everybody's best interest, but for you there's only unconditional friendliness and compassion, as well as joy that you've been able to confess.

Well, finally, the effects of confession. And these should by now be quite obvious. When we've confessed, truly confessed, we feel cleansed, we feel purified, we feel that we're back on the path, we feel that we can go forward once more. And the state in which we find ourselves, our experience then, is beautifully exemplified by a practice which we know as the Vajrasattva visualisation practice. It's a Vajrayana practice, but in spirit it's very close to the verses of confession which among others Ruchiraketu hears in his dream. In this practice we see, we visualise, Vajrasattva seated above our head. He's seated on a white lotus throne directly above our head. And he's pure white in colour. We are told traditionally the colour of Vajrasattva is like the colour of pure white snow on which the bright morning sun is shining. And he holds in one hand a vajra or *dorje* against his chest, and in the other he holds a bell against his knee. And he is in the prime of youth with long flowing black hair, and his expression is smiling and compassionate.

And in his heart we see a deep blue letter or syllable HUM, deep blue in colour, and around this HUM like a garland are the one hundred letters of the mantra of Vajrasattva, also white in colour. And these letters, the garland of letters, revolve in clockwise direction round that dark blue HUM, and as they revolve we see drops of pure white nectar like milk oozing from them. And this nectar falls down, falls down on to the crown of one's head, falls in a great stream, falls down through the median nerve, flows down through all the nerves, all the nerve centres of one's system, and washes away all evil, all unskilful mental states, washes one's whole being absolutely clean. One becomes pure, transparent, shining - just like, we are told, a crystal vase. And as it pours down, the nectar not only washes through all the impurities, but having washed them through, it accumulates within one, so that one becomes little by little just like a crystal vase filled to the brim with pure white curds.

And then, when one reaches that state, one sees that the whole sky is filled with pure white lotus flowers edge to edge, and on each lotus flower there is seated a sentient being. And above each sentient being, also on a white lotus flower, a white lotus throne or seat, is a Vajrasattva, a pure white Vajrasattva. And one sees that each being is being purified in the same way as oneself, so that one sees that one is a pure being in a pure world, a pure being among pure beings. And then one really has confessed, one feels that one really has confessed, one feels that one has, as it were, been forgiven.

Now I was going to say a few words about the worship of the Buddha and the rejoicing in merits, but in fact there's no time left, and in any case perhaps it isn't necessary now. Once we have confessed, it's only natural that we should feel intensely grateful to the Buddhas, intensely grateful to them that they have heard our confession, that they have accepted it. And it's only natural, therefore, that we should sing their praises as Ruchiraketu does. And at the same time it's only natural that we should rejoice in the merits of others, only natural that, enjoying spiritual happiness and well-being ourselves, we should rejoice in the spiritual happiness and well-being of others too, again as Ruchiraketu does.

We've not only seen the golden light at work in the world, not only ourselves been touched by the golden light. We've now vomited up the evil that was in us. We've cleared the path to ultimate perfection. We've understood and experienced for ourselves the spiritual significance of confession.

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