Lecture 127: Buddhism and Culture

Mr Chairman, Vangisa, and Friends,

As you've just heard, in these eight lectures we're concerned with a subject of very great importance, we're concerned with transformation of life and transformation of world in the *Sutra of Golden Light*. And as we've also heard, as we've also been reminded we're now already half way through the whole series. And in the course of the last four weeks, we have covered quite a lot of ground. In the first lecture, we studied the growth of a Mahayana sutra, studied, that is to say, the growth, the evolution, the gradual development - as a literary document at least - of the *Sutra of Golden Light*. And we saw that it had as it were emerged over a period of some three hundred years, from the fifth century CE to the eighth century CE. And we saw that it had emerged from the vast floating mass of oral tradition, which was current in those days - oral tradition stemming, oral tradition descending, ultimately from the Buddha's own Teaching. The original nucleus, we saw, of the *Sutra of Golden Light* is chapter three of the existing text, the existing version, the chapter which is called the chapter of confession. And this chapter, the chapter of confession, as we saw in this first lecture, is the centre of energy, as it were, of the entire sutra. And this chapter, this centre of energy, attracted from the oral tradition the eighteen other chapters that make up the work in its final form.

In the second lecture, we immersed ourselves in the Bodhisattva's Dream. We allowed ourselves as it were to go to sleep and to dream, to dream a very beautiful dream, the Bodhisattva's dream. And the Bodhisattva in question was of course Ruciraketu. And his dream, the dream which he has in Chapter Three of the Sutra, his dream was the result of a problem with which he'd been struggling, the problem - as it was to him - of why the Buddha had such a short life. Now Ruciraketu has seen the answer to this problem; but he's not been able in the sutra as yet to assimilate that answer fully. And in the dream which he has, he sees a golden drum shining like the sun. He sees Buddhas everywhere, all sitting under jewel trees. And he sees a man in the form of a Brahmin beating on a drum. And while that Brahmin is beating on the drum, there come forth confessional verses.

In the third lecture we examined the spiritual significance of confession. We saw that confession is a very ancient Buddhist practice, going back to the earliest times, going back to the days of the Buddha himself. We saw that it's common to all schools, common both to monks and to lay people. And we saw furthermore that confession was not just a verbal acknowledgement of something that you'd done or even something that you'd thought. Confession, we saw, real confession, genuine confession, was a profound spiritual experience. It was a sort of vomiting up of the evil that is within one. We further saw in that third lecture that it's the individual who confesses, that one confesses as an individual, not as a member of a group. And one confesses to other individuals: one confesses to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; more concretely, one confesses to the spiritual community. And one confesses everything; one holds nothing back; one is completely open. Not only that: one confesses as soon as possible; in fact one keeps up a constant, a continual confession. Confession in fact is an integral part of spiritual life and spiritual practice. And above all perhaps - and this was something that seemed to strike a very sympathetic chord in the hearts and minds of quite a number of people - one confesses without any feeling of guilt. In fact we saw that unless one is free from feelings of guilt, one cannot in fact truly and genuinely confess.

In the fourth lecture, we looked at the protectors of the Dharma. And these protectors are of course the four great kings, the four great kings who in Chapter Six of the Sutra come forward and promise to protect the Sutra. We saw that they occupy the lowest of the six heavens of the plane of sensuous desire. They keep under control all the different classes of non-human beings. And they represent the forces of balance and harmony in the cosmos. We also saw that they submit themselves to the Dharma, submit themselves to the golden light, are receptive to the golden light. Therefore they represent the extremely important principle of spiritual hierarchy. They - the four great kings - accept the sovereignty of the transcendental energies that are above them, and they exercise sovereignty over the earthly energies that are below them.

Now in the course of the first four lectures we've also touched rather more incidentally on quite a number of other topics. We saw for instance what the Mahayana is, we saw what the sutra is. Something was said about the significance of the dream state. Also emphasis was placed on the fact that if we want to develop spiritually, if we want to be transformed, then we must be ready to die. We've also looked into the significance of the difference between the psychological, the spiritual and the transcendental. We examined briefly the characteristics of the true individual. And also we came to know how the ancient Buddhists saw the Universe. We understood the importance of giving. We learnt what a temple is. And we even learned how to recognise dragons.

So, as I said, we've covered in the course of these four weeks, these four lectures, quite a lot of ground. So much ground, perhaps, that we have to be careful we don't forget what we are really basically concerned with. We're concerned with the golden light, the light of the Transcendental, the light of Truth, the light of Reality, the light of the Buddha; in fact with the light which is the Truth, is Reality, is the Buddha. And it's this golden light that transforms, that transforms life, that transforms self, that transforms the world. And life is transformed, self is transformed, when the individual develops, when the individual goes for Refuge, when he becomes receptive, totally receptive, to the influence, the paramount influence, of the golden light. When he - or she - cultivates skilful actions; when he becomes emotionally positive; when he experiences higher states of consciousness; when he develops higher spiritual insight and awareness. And in particular he is transformed when he transcends all his problems, when he dies to the old life, to the old self, and when he vomits up all the evil that is within him.

The world too is transformed when it becomes wholly receptive, totally receptive, to the golden light. But how does it become receptive? What is the world? The world, we may say, is the sum total of unenlightened human activities. That's the world. It's the sum total of our social, economic, political and cultural activities. It is agriculture, it's commerce, the arts, the sciences, medicine, law, government, administration, diplomacy, transport, communication, advertising, entertainment, sport. The world is all these things. Together, all these things make up the world. So how do they become receptive to the golden light? Well, they become receptive to the golden light by placing themselves at the service of the spiritual development of the individual, of the individual who is himself receptive to the golden light. But this may of course mean that they have to recognise that they cannot in fact be of any service to the individual in his spiritual development. In that case, they must then just quietly abolish themselves - that's the best service that they can render. So when all the different activities that make up the world have placed themselves at the service of the spiritual development of the individual, then the world will be transformed, transformed by the golden light. It will be a world - to paraphrase a well-known phrase - it will be a world fit for individuals to live in, a world that will help individuals to grow.

Now I've spoken of the different activities that make up the world making themselves receptive to the golden light by placing themselves at the disposal of the spiritual development of the individual, but this is only in a manner of speaking. After all, those activities are carried on by people; they don't carry themselves on. So it's therefore people who must make themselves receptive to the golden light. It's people who must place themselves at the service of the spiritual development of the individual. Only then will the world be transformed. Now the vast majority of people have no intention of doing anything of the sort. They carry on with their particular kind of human activity without any reference to the golden light, without any reference to the spiritual development of the individual. And they will continue to do so. They will continue to go on making up the world.

So does this mean that nothing can be done? Does this mean that the world cannot be transformed ? By no means. The difficulty can be overcome. It can be overcome if - or when - teams of spiritually committed individuals take up different human activities, activities that at present make up the world. And these activities they must orient in the direction of the golden light; in other words, carry them on in such a way that they conduce to the spiritual development of all concerned - that is to say, to the spiritual development of those who actually carry the activities on, whatever they are, and also those who come into contact with those activities and those who are carrying them on in any way. And this must be done in as many different spheres of human activity as possible, such as the production and distribution of food, community living, education, the arts, printing and publication, transport. In this way we shall bring into existence a world within a world, a transformed world within the untransformed world. And the transformed world can then be gradually expanded. Now I've dealt with all this in rather more detail in the course of the third and fourth of the recent lectures which I gave in Brighton - that is to say, in 'A Nucleus of a New Society' and 'Blueprint for a New World' - and I don't want to repeat now what I said then, but I do just want to indicate the connections.

As I've already said, in this series we are concerned with the golden light, with the light that transforms. And in the second and third lectures of this series, we were concerned mainly with the transformation of self. And in the fourth lecture, the one which we had last week, we were concerned mainly with transformation of world. But we were concerned with the general principle of world transformation. We saw that the world can be transformed only if it submits to the golden light, only if it becomes receptive to the golden light. So this is what happens. The four great kings come forward, and they promise to protect the Sutra. That is to say, they place the energies which they represent, which they symbolise, at the service of the golden light, at the service of the spiritual development of the individual.

From now onwards we shall be concerned with transformation of specific aspects of the world, of particular departments of human activity: transformation of culture, transformation of the environment, economics, even politics. And the first three departments are each represented by a goddess. The three goddesses are Sarasvati, Drdha, and Sri. And in subsequent chapters of the Sutra, subsequent chapters of the *Sutra of Golden Light*, we therefore find these three goddesses coming forward one by one and promising to protect the Sutra. That is to say, we find them placing the department of human activity which she represents, which each one represents, at the service of the golden light, at the service of the development of the individual. So at the beginning of Chapter 7, the great goddess Sarasvati comes forward. She salutes the Buddha. She makes a promise; in fact she makes a number of promises, promises relating to the monk who preaches the Dharma, the monk who preaches the *Sutra of Golden Light*. We'll see what these promises are in a few minutes. First we must find out who Sarasvati is.

Now if we were in India there would be no difficulty about this, no difficulty about finding out who Sarasvati is, especially if we were in India during the five or six weeks that follow the end of the rainy season. In many parts of India, this particular period, this particular season, the few weeks immediately succeeding the end of the rainy season, this period is known as the 'Pujas' with a capital P. And it's so called because during this particular period, a whole series of great Hindu religious festivals and celebrations is held in honour of various Hindu gods and goddesses. And it's a very very festive season. Everybody is happy, everybody is cheerful, everybody is more friendly than usual. And of course, over all there's the beautiful blue sky. It's the best season, the most enjoyable season, the most beautiful season of the whole year. It's not too hot, it's not too cold, and the sun shines all the time. There's often a very beautiful, soft, gentle breeze and a cloudless blue sky over everything. And people often take a holiday from work - they just don't feel like working. They buy new clothes, they go and see their friends, go and see their relations, even sometimes making quite long journeys, and they exchange presents.

And of course they go, usually in the evening, to worship the various gods and goddesses; and one of the most popular of these is Sarasvati. In some parts of India, for instance in Bengal, special images are made, just for the Puja season, just for that particular period, and they're installed in temporary shrines in places accessible to the public, because after all everybody goes. So, lots of images are needed, lots of shrines are needed. In India one may say, people go to the Puja rather as in England they go to football matches or to bingo. They go in their tens of thousands, they go in their hundreds of thousands. And on the occasions of very great, very special festivities, some of which come around only every ten or every twelve years, they go in their millions.

Now these images which are specially made for the occasion, specially made for the Pujas, these images of Sarasvati are made of clay. And they're beautifully painted, beautifully decorated, and they are made life-size, sometimes a little larger than life. So, how is Sarasvati depicted? How is she represented? She's depicted as a beautiful young woman with long flowing dresses and she wears a beautiful brocade saree, a Benares saree, generally red in colour, with a golden border. And she is seated on a white *hamsa*. Usually *hamsa* is translated as swan, but actually it's a goose. In the West goose has its own cultural associations, which are quite different from the cultural associations which it has in India. In India the goose is a beautiful, elegant bird which conjures up all sorts of religious associations. So Sarasvati is seated on a white *hamsa*, this white goose. And she holds a *vina*, an Indian musical instrument, sometimes translated as a lute in her lap.

Now, we often find that different deities - this is in India - different deities are particularly worshipped by different classes of people. We find in India that businessmen, merchants, traders, shopkeepers, worship Ganesh, the elephant-headed god Ganesh, who removes obstacles, and Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. In the same way the athletes, those who go in for physical training, the body builders, the weight lifters, the muscle men, they worship Hanuman, that is to say the monkey god, the great devotee of Rama who is renowned for his great physical strength and energy and enterprise. Women and girls, on the other hand, are particularly fond of Krishna, but not so much because he preached the *Bhagavadgita*, but because he dances, at night, in the forest with the *gopis* or cow-girls or, more poetically, the milk maids.

So, who in particular worships Sarasvati? Well, it's the students. On the eve of her festival, her altar is piled high with exercise books and textbooks, even with pens and pencils, even indiarubbers. I've seen this myself on a number of occasions. The students, by placing their books, by placing their pens and pencils and rubbers there, are invoking Sarasvati's blessing. In particular they're asking for her help in the passing of the forthcoming examinations, which in India follow rather quickly, rather too quickly for comfort, on the Pujas.

So, what does Sarasvati stand for ? It's pretty obvious. She stands for learning, she stands for education, she stands, in a word, for culture. Now, the name Sarasvati does not give us any clue to her actual function. The name Sarasvati means 'abounding in water', sometimes translated as 'watery', but I personally prefer 'abounding in water'. And it's the name, as one might have suspected, of a river, the name of a river, a river that still flows, that you could still find on a map, in Northwestern India. So, how did the river come to be transformed into a goddess, into a goddess of learning and culture? As is usually the case in India, this is a very long story. I can only hope to give you a very rough outline of the story, because the story goes back several thousand years; it goes back to the time when the Aryans invaded India. No one really knows where they originally came from. But they entered India from the northwest, they came with horses, they came with chariots, and they gradually subdued the original inhabitants of the land. And with them, with these invading Aryans, came not only their warriors, not only their fighters, not only their rulers. There came their priests, and these were the famous Brahmins.

And the Brahmins by this time had developed an elaborate system of ritual, an elaborate system of sacrifices. There were sacrifices for every conceivable kind of purpose, every conceivable kind of occasion. And these sacrifices were often performed on the banks of a river. After all, it was a convenient spot, the bank of the river was smooth, just sand, and it provided a flat surface for the construction of the altar. Because in those ancient days there were no temples. Everything was done, everything was performed, out in the open air. And because a river was always flowing nearby, there was plenty of water available for the ritual ablutions to which the brahmins attached great importance. And moreover, on the banks of the river, far from human habitation perhaps, there was quiet, there was seclusion, there was peace.

Now, the banks of certain rivers were particularly favoured for the performance, for the celebration, of these Brahminical, these Vedic sacrifices - and among them was a river called the Sarasvati. There does seem to have grown up an association between this river, or the name of this river, and the whole sacrificial system. Now, a great deal of Brahminical culture was based on the sacrificial system, or had grown out of it. For example, in the course of the sacrifices various hymns, as we call them, were recited - that is to say the famous Vedic hymns. These hymns were often of great poetic beauty. There were hymns to the sun, hymns to the moon, hymns to the dawn, hymns to the winds, hymns to the thunder-god, Indra; hymns to the heavenly twins, to the heavenly horses, and so on. And these hymns, which are often very glorious in their language and conception, represent the beginnings of Indian literature. Some may have been composed even before the Aryans entered India. Their language is very archaic, so archaic in fact that even by the time of which we are speaking, their language had become quite difficult to understand. So a whole science of etymology was developed by the ancient Brahmins, called Nirukti. And along with that, grammar, phonetics, prosody. Similarly these hymns were often chanted to special tunes. So here we have the beginnings of music, at least of a certain kind of music.

Moreover, the altars that were used in connection with the Brahminical sacrifices had to be constructed in a certain way. Some of them were very elaborate. They had to be of a certain size, and of a certain shape. I remember there was one sacrificial altar for one particular purpose which had to be shaped like an eagle with outstretched wings. And the altars had to be composed even of a certain fixed number of bricks. So this led to the development of arithmetic and geometry. So we see that a great deal of ancient Indian culture was associated with the sacrificial system. And this culture was associated with the river banks, with the banks of the Sarasvati in particular. And thus the Sarasvati became associated with culture.

Moreover, the river already had become a goddess as it were in her own right. Like all ancient peoples, the ancient Indians personified, as we would say, natural features, such as rivers, mountains, lakes, the earth itself, the sun, the moon. They saw them as gods and goddesses. We may even say they experienced them as gods and goddesses. So quite early in Indian history, quite early in Indian cultural history, you have a river goddess, called Sarasvati who is particularly associated with culture, who is in fact the goddess of culture.

But the process of development did not stop there. There is in the Vedas, a rather shadowy goddess called Vac, a very ancient goddess. There are several hymns to her in the *Rig Veda*. *Vac* means speech, not so much ordinary speech; it means speech in the sense of powerful, significant speech - even, we may say, creative speech. It's rather interesting, by the way, that the ancient Indians should have deified speech, should have made a deity, a goddess, Vac, out of speech, and addressed hymns to her, hymns to communication, we may say. It shows that the ancient Indians realised the great importance of human communication. Now what happened was, in the course of centuries, Sarasvati gradually assumed the

attributes of Vac. And the two goddesses became identified, or if you like Vac became, the goddess Vac became, absorbed in the goddess Sarasvati.

Now the word which Vac represented was the spoken word. As yet, there was no such thing as writing in India, at least not for religious purposes. Writing was something profane, writing was something used for keeping accounts. So similarly, the culture with which Sarasvati was associated, of which she had become a personification, the symbol was an orally transmitted culture. Everything was handed down from the teacher to the pupil personally, by word of mouth. So in such a culture memory is of tremendous importance. If somebody's memory fails, then valuable knowledge, knowledge that is of permanent value to the community, may be lost. So Sarasvati became associated also with good memory.

There's a similar situation in ancient Greece. In ancient Greece, in ancient Greek mythology, one has the Nine Muses. The Nine Muses are the personification of various arts and sciences. They're the companions in some accounts the daughters of the God Apollo, the god of poetry, of music and prophecy. And who is the mother of the Muses? The mother of the Muses is Mnemosyne, whose name means memory. Memory is the mother of the muses, memory is the mother of the arts and the sciences.

In other words, in all preliterate societies, there's no culture without memory. Later, in India of course, a change did take place, Oral traditions were all written down, or nearly all written down. And Sarasvati became not just a goddess of culture. She became a goddess of literature, goddess not only of the spoken, but of the written word, goddess even, patroness even of scholarship, of learning. She also became associated with the god Brahma, became regarded in fact as married to the god Brahma. Brahma is one of the Trimurti or three principal embodiments of the divine, in Puranic Hinduism. There's Brahma, the Creator, Vishnu, the Preserver, and Shiva, the Destroyer.

So this is the Sarasvati who is still worshipped in India today, more than a thousand years after all these developments took place. She is the goddess of learning, of education and culture. She is the embodiment of the principle of speech or communication. She's the personification of memory, the patroness of literature both sacred and profane. And she's married to the god Brahma, the creator.

So this is the goddess who appears at the beginning of the chapter six of the sutra and promises to protect the sutra. Incidentally, it's the first time that she appears in Indian literature at all, that is to say, appears in her capacity as culture goddess. At least, that is what I was told many years ago by a very great scholar indeed, the late Dr. Surendran Nathlasgupta, the author of the standard seven-volume history of Indian philosophy published by the University of Cambridge. Probably he was the greatest authority on the subject of Indian philosophy in modern times. He was a Hindu, in fact, a believing Hindu, a practising Hindu, but unlike some Indian Hindu scholars, he believed that the development of Hinduism had been deeply influenced by Buddhism. And I remember that we were talking about this one day, talking about this influence of Buddhism on Hinduism, not the other way round. We were talking, I remember, in Lucknow, as long ago as 1950, and somehow the name of the goddess Sarasvati came up. And he said, 'Do you know, the earliest reference to this goddess occurs in a Buddhist sutra?' - in other words, in the *Sutra of Golden Light*. Well, I didn't know. At that time I hadn't read the *Sutra of Golden Light*. I think, in fact, I hadn't even heard of the *Sutra of Golden Light*.

But this does raise an important question. Sarasvati clearly is a Hindu goddess, but what is a Hindu goddess doing in a Buddhist Mahayana sutra? How does she come to be there? In chapter 3, we found a Brahmin appearing in the Bodhisattva's dream. But here we have something more serious than that. We have a Hindu goddess playing a part, even an important part, in the sutra itself. So what does it mean?

First of all, we must remember one thing. We must remember that Hinduism is an ethnic religion. It's the sum total of the religious - as we would say - beliefs and practices of Indian people over a period of three thousand years. It's not a universal religion as I define that term. As a whole, and I emphasise as a whole, it is not concerned with the development, the spiritual development, of the individual. Like other ethnic religions, it's more concerned with the preservation of the group. Sarasvati therefore represents the ethnic culture, the culture of the group, or if you like she represents the cultural heritage of the group, that is to say, she represents Indian culture.

Now I'm using this word culture, and it's interesting to compare this English word culture with the Sanskrit equivalent. Culture of course means tillage, rearing, production as in agriculture, horticulture, floriculture, apiculture and so on. And of course we then have the applied or derived meaning of the word

with physical culture and mental culture, so that in the end the word comes to mean something like development. We have the cultured man, or cultivated man, that is to say the man is developed, or who has been developed, or who has developed himself. Ideally, of course, the cultured man, the cultivated man, is the man who is developed in an all rounded manner, physically, mentally, emotionally, morally.

Now, the Sanskrit equivalent of the English word culture conveys much the same sort of meaning, but with an interesting difference of emphasis. The Sanskrit equivalent is *samskriti. Samskriti* means 'the perfected', and it's contrasted with *prakriti* or 'the natural'. The first is a product of human art, the second is the product of nature. And we find this difference reflected in the sphere of language. *Saskriti*, as it is called, the language Sanskrit, the ancient Indian classical language Sanskrit, is the perfected form of language. It's language which has been regularised, polished, refined. And *Samskriti* as such is contrasted with Prakrit which is the natural form of the language, in other words, it's the vernacular. The first, Sanskrit, is spoken by educated, cultured people ,the second, Prakrit, is spoken by uneducated people, by the masses. And we find that this difference is observed in certain classical Indian dramas. The leading characters of these dramas all speak Sanskrit. The other characters, servants, also women, speak Prakrit, not Sanskrit. All this is a little bit by the way, perhaps, but it puts us in a better position to understand what the great goddess Sarasvati represents, in a better position to understand the significance of her appearance in the sutra, the significance of her promise.

As we saw, she represents ethnic culture, the culture of the group. More specifically she represents Indian culture. But she also represents what that culture itself represents, what *samskriti* represents. She represents human nature in its more developed state, or human activities in their more polished and refined forms. We could even say that Sarasvati represents the cultivated person, or better still, she represents the cultivated mind. Now we've said, we've seen, that Sarasvati promises to protect the sutra. But this is not strictly speaking correct. What she actually promises to protect is the monk who preaches the Dharma, the monk who preaches the *Sutra of Golden Light*. In other words, she promises to protect the monk who communicates the Dharma, who communicates the golden light. Now the Dharma is what we call Buddhism, and Buddhism is not an ethnic religion. Buddhism is a universal religion - that is to say, it's a spiritual teaching addressed to the individual, or to the potential individual, to one who is trying to become an individual. Now the golden light is the light of the Transcendental, the light of the Truth, the light of Reality, the light of the Buddha. It's a light which is the Truth, is Reality, is the Buddha.

So how is this golden light to be communicated ? Obviously a medium of communication is needed, a language is needed, not only in the literal sense, but in the metaphorical sense as well. And that medium will have to fulfil two requirements. First, it will have to be common to both parties to the communication - common to the monk who is preaching the sutra, who's communicating the golden light, and to those to whom he is preaching, to whom and with whom he's communicating. And secondly, it will have to be sufficiently refined, sufficiently transparent, to communicate something at least of the splendour of the golden light.

Now the preacher of the Dharma who is mentioned here in the sutra is preaching in India; he is trying to communicate the golden light to the people of India. And he will therefore have to speak the language of Indian culture. Only the language of culture is sufficiently refined to act as the medium of communication for the golden light. And only the language of Indian culture will be sufficiently familiar to be intelligible. So this then is what the appearance of the great goddess Sarasvati represents, what her promise to protect the preacher of the Dharma represents. She represents the coming together of universal religion and ethnic culture, represents the coming together of Buddhism and Indian culture or, more specifically, the coming together of the Mahayana spiritual ideals and the rich and vital culture of the Indian Gupta period, the period that also produced some of the most distinguished Buddhist art.

Not only that, not only do universal religion and ethnic culture come together. The ethnic culture places itself at the service of the universal religion, is ready to act as its medium of communication. The great goddess Sarasvati promises to protect the monk who preaches the Dharma, promises to protect the one who communicates the golden light. Now this is by no means a unique situation, even though we do encounter it here in an unusually dramatic form. Universal religion always speaks the language of ethnic culture, at least to begin with. To begin with at least, it has to speak that language. In a sense, there's no other language for it to speak. The Buddha himself spoke the cultural language of his day, or rather, spoke the cultural languages. There seem to have been two languages in his day: the language of the *brahmanas* and the language of the *sramanas*; or Vedic and non-Vedic, even anti-Vedic languages; perhaps even an Aryan language of culture and a non-Aryan language of culture.

In our last lecture, last week, we saw that Buddhism spoke the language of Indian cosmology, saw that it spoke in terms of rings of golden mountains and circular oceans. And the *Sutra of Golden Light* itself uses the language of Indian mythology. It speaks in terms of gods and goddesses, and various classes of non-human beings. But of course, Buddhism did not remain confined to India. Eventually it spread throughout Asia. It came into contact with other ethnic cultures, especially with those of Central Asia, China, Japan and Tibet. And these cultures too placed themselves at its service, were also ready to act as its medium of communication. So Buddhism gradually learned to speak other languages; it expresses itself in terms of Chinese culture, in terms of Japanese culture and so on. And now we find Buddhism coming West, find the golden light coming West. In other words, individuals of Western origin are coming into contact with the Dharma, coming into contact with the golden light, even want to communicate it to others of Western origin. So what do they do? What do they have to do? They have to express themselves in terms of Western culture. Buddhism has to learn the language of Western culture. And this raises a number of interesting questions. Can Buddhism be separated from Eastern culture? Is an acquaintance with Eastern culture essential for the understanding of Buddhism? Does a Western Buddhist have to adopt Eastern culture? Or how can Western culture place itself at the service of Buddhism? What is Western culture? Will a Western Buddhist culture ever be developed? Can the Dharma be taught without the medium of culture? I hope that we shall have time for a brief consideration of these questions at the end of the lecture. We must now take a more detailed look at Sarasvati's promise, try to see what exactly she does undertake to do. In fact, we must take a more detailed look at the whole of this chapter.

This chapter, chapter 6, is rather miscellaneous in character, even for the *Sutra of Golden Light*, so it'll give us a good idea of the kind of material that the *Sutra of Golden Light* includes, indeed, the kind of material that a late Mahayana sutra often includes. This chapter is quite a short chapter; in the English translation, it's not much more than four pages long. And it opens with Sarasvati saluting the Buddha. She then makes her promise, or promises. She promises to bestow various gifts, various blessings, on the monk who preaches the Dharma. And these are essentially five in number. She promises to bestow first, eloquence; then, a good memory; thirdly, she promises to arrange the substance of his speech so that it is well spoken; and fourthly, she promises great illumination and knowledge; finally, promises a *dharani*. We'll consider each of these in turn when we've gone through the whole chapter.

Now immediately after Sarasvati's promises, there comes a very curious passage indeed - indeed, a very ethnic passage - and it's concerned with, believe it or not, popular magic. Sarasvati herself is still speaking, and she explains how the monk who preaches the Dharma should take a kind of ritual herb bath. Brahminical ideas of ritual purification are clearly reflected here. What we have in this passage in fact, it seems to me, is a lump of ethnic culture which the Sutra has not been able fully to digest. Sarasvati says that powder is to be made for more than thirty different herbs and resins. And these have to be ground, ground into powder when a certain asterism is in the ascendant, and then they are to be consecrated one hundred times with a magic spell.

Sarasvati then describes how she herself should be worshipped. First of all, one should make a magic circle with cow dung. A very Indian thing, this cow dung. Their associations as far as cow dung is concerned are very different from ours - cow dung is a very holy thing, you may say, in India, a very sacred thing - very different associations indeed. And having made the magic circle with cow dung, one should strew it, should decorate it, with flowers. And then one should place sweet juice in a gold vessel and in a silver vessel. And one should also put in the mandala - as it is virtually - four men clad in armour. This is all the text says: four men clad in armour. There may be a sort of reminiscence here, a sort of reference to the four great kings. And also four beautifully adorned maidens bearing pots. They may here be a reference to, or reminiscence of, the offering goddesses, but the text doesn't say so. It simply says 'four beautifully adorned maidens bearing pots'. Various other directions are also given. The image of the goddess, the image of Sarasvati, should be decorated with umbrellas. Again, Indian associations as far as umbrellas are concerned are quite different from ours; suggest royalty, supremacy, triumph, victory, not a rainy day. Flags and banners and then more spells are also given. And finally the goddess promises that she will herself be present at the ritual herb bath. She promises to remove diseases, quarrels, bad dreams, and evil spirits.

Now all this may seem rather a long way from the golden light. However, Sarasvati concludes by saying that all this is for the sake of the monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen who hold, that is to say, who preserve and perpetuate, the chief sutras, so that they may gain Enlightenment. Well, the Buddha then congratulates Sarasvati, and he praises her for her words concerning spells and medicaments, as the Sutra says. The Brahmin Kaundinya then speaks. He's already appeared in Chapter 2. He now addresses the great goddess Sarasvati. He says that she is worthy of worship; she possesses great asceticism; she is famous

in all the worlds; she is a giver of boons, of great virtues. He then proceeds to describe what seems to be a very archaic form of the goddess. He says 'Dwelling on a peak, beautifully clad in a grass garment, wearing grass clothing, she stands on one foot.' So what does all this mean? Clearly there's some connection with the sacrificial system, or at least with the culture that grows out of that system. But why is the goddess said to dwell on a peak? What is the meaning of her standing on one foot? No doubt there is a meaning, but I must confess that in this case, I've not been able to find it out. And I suspect it would require a good deal of research into ancient Indian, especially Vedic symbolism. Meanwhile, your guess is as good as mine.

But the wearing of grass clothing is more explicable. Grass plays an important part in Brahminical ritual - again these associations are quite different - especially *kusa* grass and *dubha* grass. These were regarded as sacred grasses and are still widely used in India for religious purposes. So that we can see there's a definite connection between this very archaic form of the goddess and the Brahminical sacrificial system; Brahminical culture between the goddess on the one hand, and all that that culture represents on the other. Indeed, the mention, the mere mention, of sacred grass, of *kusa*, of *dubha*, sparks off all sorts of associations in the Indian mind, especially in the orthodox Hindu mind. It's difficult for us to appreciate this, because we are not familiar with that kind of cultural language. So let's take a parallel example from our own culture. This may help us to understand. Let's take the example of mistletoe.

Suppose someone mentions to us mistletoe, well, it will spark off all sorts of associations. I wonder what you're thinking of *[chuckles].* You may think of the ancient Druids, of oak trees, golden sickles, human sacrifice, Julius Caesar. You may also think -quite wrongly - of Stonehenge (Stonehenge had nothing to do with the Druids); think of eisteddfods (I hope I've pronounced that correctly); think of Wales, devolution, Welsh dragons, bards, the poet Gray, Edward the Third, Christmas. So for us mistletoe will have all these associations, and many more.

So it's just the same with sacred grass, with *kusa* and *dubha*. For the Indian, these spark off all sorts of associations. Sacred grass: sacrifices, brahmins, ancient sages, *rishis* with long white beards and sacred threads, asceticism, the hermit life, getting away from it all, Valmiki, the Ramayana, the gods, the Vedas, the Sanskrit language. For the Indian, for the orthodox Hindu, sacred grass - *kusa* and *dubha* - will spark off all these associations and many more. Now all these associations are bound up with certain emotions, even with very deep emotions. So the fact that Sarasvati is described as wearing grass clothing not only sparks off these associations. It also brings in the emotions, brings them into the Sutra, places them at the service of the spiritual development of the individual, places them at the service of the golden light. So from this example, we can see how important it is to find what we may call cultural equivalence, just as mistletoe is a sort of cultural equivalence of *kusa* grass or *dubha* grass. We can see how important it is that Buddhism should speak the cultural language of the people it is trying to reach.

But it's time we got on with the chapter. Having described Sarasvati as standing on a peak, etc, the Brahmin Kaundinya says that all the gods assembled and they asked her, asked Sarasvati, to speak. And this the goddess does. She recites a long spell followed by a prayer that one's knowledge may prosper in such things as textbooks, verses, magic books, doctrinal books, and poems. Kaundinya then praises the goddess in a beautiful hymn, after which the chapter comes to an end. Now, I'm going to read this hymn because it gives a good description of Sarasvati in a fully developed Puranic form.

'May all the hordes of *bhutas* hear me. I will praise the goddess, whose face is supremely, extremely beautiful, who among women in the world of gods, *gandharvas*, and lords of *asuras*, is the supreme chief, excellent goddess. Sarasvati by name has members that have piles of adornments of various virtues. Her eyes are broad. She is brilliant in merit. She is full of the virtues of pure knowledge. She is beautiful like a variety of jewels. I will praise her by reason of her distinguished virtues of excellent speech, because she causes excellent, supreme success, because of her famous teaching, because she is a mine of virtues, because she is pure and supreme, because she is brilliant as a lotus, because her eyes are fair and excellent, because her residence is beautiful, because her appearance is beautiful, because she is thoroughly adorned with inconceivable virtues, because she resembles the moon, because her splendour is pure, because she is a mine of knowledge, because of the superiority of her mindfulness, because she is the best of lionesses, because she is a vehicle for men, because she is adorned with eight arms, because her appearance is like that of the full moon, because of her heartening speech, because of her soft voice, because she is endowed with profound wisdom, because she causes the accomplishment of the best deeds, because she is an excellent being, because she is honoured by the lord of gods and *asuras*, because she is praised in all the

dwellings of a multitude of gods and *asuras*, because she is continually worshipped in the abode of a multitude of *bhutas*.'

So this is the hymn, the hymn which the Brahmin Kaundinya sings in Sanskrit verses. This is a prose translation, but the original of course is in verse, is in metre. Now for Sarasvati's promises. After that we'll deal very briefly with the questions that arose in connection with Buddhism and culture, especially Buddhism and Western culture, and then conclude. First of all, Sarasvati promises to bestow eloquence. And she says she will bestow it for the sake of adorning the speech of the monk who preaches the Law, who preaches the Dharma. The monk could of course be a follower of the Mahayana, a follower, that is to say, of the Bodhisattva Ideal. So, naturally he wants to share the Dharma, share the Buddha's teaching, with as many people as possible. He wants to share the golden light. So this means that he must be able to put across the golden light effectively. He therefore needs the power of communication, he needs eloquence. So Sarasvati gives him eloquence. And this eloquence is not a matter of textbook rhetoric, it's not a matter of the tricks of the trade of the professional after-dinner speaker. It is the genuine feelings of the heart, finding easy, natural expression in appropriate thoughts, appropriate words, and appropriate images.

Second, Sarasvati promises to bestow a good memory. This clearly is necessary for a preacher of the Dharma. There are references in the Sutra to its being written down, but the memorising of the Sutra is still considered to be important and this is still the tradition in some parts of the Buddhist world, even today. I remember one of my own Tibetan teachers telling me how many pages of text, how many pages of scripture, he had to memorise a day as a small boy, as a novice monk - I think he was seven. The way of preaching the Dharma in ancient India was rather different from our own. It was more like a sort of public seminar. The custom was for the monk to recite a portion of the Sutra, a few lines of the Sutra or other text, and then give his own detailed paraphrase, explanation and so on, maybe with illustrated stories. And in this manner, he'd make his way through the whole Sutra from beginning to end. He might be reciting it and discoursing on it every day for several hours and this might go on even for several months, in the case of rather long Sutras. So, clearly a good memory was needed, and this is what Sarasvati promises to bestow - good memory.

Third, she promises to arrange the substance of his speech so that it is well-spoken. The content of Mahayana Sutras is frequently very difficult, but not only that. Only too often, the subject matter is not organised systematically. It's all mixed up, disconnected, even confused. So it is quite easy for the monk to get lost, as it were, in the Sutra, lost in the jungle of the Sutra. If he's not careful, he may not, so impenetrable sometimes is the jungle, perceive its real message. And this is certainly the case with the *Sutra of Golden Light*. It may not be one of the most difficult of the Mahayana Sutras, that is to say as regards content, but it is certainly one of the least well arranged, at least in conventional, literary terms. So here too Sarasvati helps out, she helps the monk to expound the sutra in orderly, systematic fashion. And for this, obviously the monk must have an understanding of the Sutra.

So fourthly, she promises to bestow great illumination and knowledge. It's not enough for the monk to know the words of the Sutra, not enough for him to be able to recite the words of the Sutra, he must be able to penetrate its meaning. He must be himself in touch with the golden light, even at one with the golden light. The golden light must shine through him. When he speaks it must be the golden light speaking - otherwise the *Sutra of Golden Light* is not truly preached. So the goddess promises to bestow great illumination and knowledge. And at this point it is clear that she does not represent any merely external agency because no external agency can give illumination and knowledge. Sarasvati really represents the monk's own cultured, cultivated consciousness, represents the refined, powerful emotions associated with that consciousness, emotions which have now become integrated with the spiritual life and which therefore contribute to the realisation of the transcendental, the realisation of the golden light.

Fifthly, lastly, she promises to bestow a *dharani*. A *dharani* is a sort of magical spell. It's something that is to be borne in mind, something that is to be recited. The word comes from the same root as the word Dharma, from the root *dhri*, meaning 'that which supports or upholds'. The *Sutra of Golden Light*, as we've already seen, is a late Sutra. It was written down in the 4th to 8th century CE, and at that time the Mahayana was being as it were superseded by the Vajrayana, or rather by the Mantrayana, which was the early phase of the Vajrayana. So the goddess's promise of a *dharani* therefore represents the irruption of the Vajrayana into the Mahayana, or the Mantrayana into the Paramitayana. It suggests that the preacher of the Dharma, the preacher of the *Sutra of Golden Light*, needs in his work the special quality associated with the Vajrayana. He needs something as it were magical, something as it were transcendentally

charismatic. He needs to be a kind of Padmasambhava figure, otherwise it's very difficult for him to succeed in his task. This is a very important topic but there's no time to go into it now. We must now go straight on to the questions arising out of the relation between Buddhism and culture, especially Buddhism and Western culture. And I'm afraid that we shall have to be not only brief but even oracularly brief. It may be possible to have a more detailed discussion some other time.

Can Buddhism be separated from Eastern culture? Not only can it be separated, it must be separated; at least, it must be distinguished. Buddhism is not Eastern culture, however beautiful Eastern culture may be. Buddhism is not culture at all. The Dharma is not culture. The Golden Light is not culture. Culture is only the medium. Unfortunately, many Eastern Buddhists, including those who come to the West hoping to teach, do not understand this. And sometimes they think that they are preaching the Dharma when they are only propagating their own national culture. And this causes great confusion in the minds of at least some Western Buddhists. Is acquaintance with Eastern culture necessary to the understanding of Buddhism? Yes and no. Historically Buddhism has found expression in terms of Eastern culture. If we want to approach the Dharma, we therefore have to have some acquaintance with Eastern culture, at least initially. For instance, we are studying the *Sutra of Golden Light*. Here the Dharma is expressed very much in terms of Indian culture, and without some understanding of Indian culture the message of the Sutra remains more or less inaccessible. But acquaintance with Eastern culture can be dispensed with, can be dispensed with if one is in personal contact with a spiritual teacher - with, that is to say, a spiritual teacher who does not have to rely on Eastern culture as medium of communication.

Does a Western Buddhist have to adopt Eastern culture? Well, not ln the West, not in principle that is. Until Western Buddhist cultural equivalents have emerged, we shall have to use or adapt some elements of Eastern Buddhist culture, for instance in such matters as robes, style of chanting, iconography. In the East, however, it's probably best for the Western Buddhist to conform completely to the local Buddhist culture. Of course, he must be careful not to mistake that culture for the Dharma. However, it's becoming less and less necessary for the Western Buddhist to go East at all. Now we do have everything that we need at home, at least here in Great Britain.

How can Western culture place itself at the service of Buddhism? This is quite a complex question. I'm going to say just one thing. Western Buddhists can at least make a start by establishing points of contact, that is to say points of contact with those great Western creative figures, great Western writers who, at least at times, at least to a limited extent, have made some approach to the Dharma. I'm thinking of such people as Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Blake, Wordsworth, even D H Lawrence. What is Western culture? I'm sorry to say that I must baulk this one altogether. It's much too big a question to be disposed of towards the tail end of a lecture. I'm afraid I will have to fall back to my usual promise of a future discussion. Will a Western Buddhist culture ever be developed? Well, I certainly hope so. In fact, a small beginning has already been made, is being made, within the FWBO. But as yet it's so small that I'm not going to say anything about it. I'll just leave it to develop in peace. Can the Dharma be taught without the medium of culture ? Yes, it can, but only within the context of a close and intense spiritual relationship between teacher and disciple.

Now this whole question of Buddhism and culture is a very important one. Culture occupies a very important place in our lives, a very important place even in our spiritual development. When speaking at the beginning of the lecture about the Sarasvati Puja in India, which they've either just had or are just going to have, I couldn't help wishing that we could have in this country a Sarasvati Puja as it were of our own - that is to say a Puja or celebration, a festivity, that will symbolise for us the integration of cultural activity into spiritual life. And how wonderful it would be if we could have such a puja, such a Sarasvati Puja, or better still, how wonderful it would be if we could have a Manjughosa Puja. Sarasvati after all represents more the ethnic culture. She represents Indian culture, but Manjughosa is more universal. Manjughosa is found all over the Mahayana Buddhist world. He was very popular in China, very popular in Tibet, and he could perhaps well come West. Manjughosa represents, we may say, Manjughosa symbolises the profoundest Wisdom, transcendental Wisdom expressed in terms of the most highly developed, the most refined culture. And as most of you know, he is usually depicted in Bodhisattva form, depicted as a beautiful young prince, golden yellow in colour, and he sits cross-legged on a blue lotus throne. He wears a crown, a headdress of five full-blown blue lotus flowers. In his right hand, which is raised aloft, he carries, he wields, a flaming sword, the sword of Wisdom, and in his left hand is a book which he holds against his heart. His expression is compassionate and smiling; and the whole figure radiates brilliant golden light. In popular Tantric Buddhism an effort was made to regard Sarasvati as the consort of Manjughosa. We may say that the Tantra had, or at least certain branches of the Tantra had at times a sort

even of mania for finding consorts for everybody, even for the Buddha. But Manjughosa remains eternally without a consort, remains single, remains celibate, remains perfect. So there's no need to have a personification, a separate personification of culture as a separate personality, a separate being. Besides, culture in the person of Manjughosa has been fully assimilated. Culture has been fully absorbed, culture is, if you like, the ornaments that sparkle on the golden body of Manjughosa. Ultimately, the golden light transcends culture.

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