

Lecture 128: Nature, Man and Enlightenment

For the last five weeks we've been exposing ourselves to the influence, to the quite potent influence, of the Golden Light; and in the course of these five weeks we may not have been exactly transformed - at least, not totally transformed - but the exposure will certainly have had at least some effect on us. We will have come to understand at least some things. One of the things that we will have come to understand is the fact that the Sutra of Golden Light is a Mahayana sutra. It's a sutra, a discourse of the Buddha, a scripture, that reflects and projects the spiritual ideals - if you like, the spiritual vision - of the Mahayana, the Great Vehicle, or better still the Great Way: the way that is, in principle, the way to supreme Enlightenment, to supreme Buddhahood, for all sentient beings.

Now there are in existence quite a number of Mahayana sutras, some of them existing in the original Sanskrit, others existing in both the original Sanskrit and in Chinese, Tibetan translations; some existing only in translation, but altogether there are several hundreds of these Mahayana sutras. And there are various kinds of Mahayana sutras. Some of the more important - if you like, some of the most important - of the Mahayana sutras are known as *vaipulya* sutras, and *vaipulya* means broad, vast, extensive; and some of these Mahayana sutras are so called, are called *vaipulya* sutras, not just because they are very lengthy - though some of them are very lengthy indeed; some of them amount practically to a whole thick volume, at least in the English translation. They are so called because they are broad and vast and extensive in scope, that is to say with respect to their subject matter; with respect to the topics with which they deal. And essentially, basically, the subject matter of each of these *vaipulya* sutras, these broad, vast, extensive sutras, is the total Dharma: that is to say, not just one particular subdivision of the teaching, not just one particular section, not even just one particular aspect, but the total Dharma, though each of the *vaipulya* sutras sees that total all-inclusive Dharma from its own special, its own distinctive, angle of vision; and perhaps also sees it in terms of the special needs, the special spiritual needs, of a particular class of followers.

Each of the *vaipulya* sutras is, therefore, complete in itself. It can be studied, it can be reflected on, even practised, without reference to any other sutra, without reference to any other formulation of the Dharma, at least so far as the spiritual needs of the student are concerned. If you want to study the sutra from a linguistic point of view or scholastic point of view, that's another matter, but from the spiritual point of view one can confine oneself quite sufficiently, quite satisfactorily, to just that one *vaipulya* sutra.

Now the Sutra of Golden Light does not in so many words style itself a *vaipulya* sutra. The expression *vaipulya* sutra is not part of its as it were official title. But there's no doubt that this is, in fact, what it is: it is a *vaipulya* sutra. To begin with, it's fairly extensive in size, and in content it's very extensive indeed. Like the other *vaipulya* sutras, the Sutra of Golden Light is in fact a whole world in itself, and the sutra itself, so to speak, knows this: knows that it is a whole world in itself. In the introduction, in the introductory chapter, the Buddha says: 'I will make known this sutra, the profound Buddha region' - it's a whole region in itself, a Buddha region. 'I will make known this sutra, the profound Buddha region, the marvellous mystery of all the Buddhas, for millions of aeons.' And in much the same way, in chapter 13, the sutra is spoken of as 'the profound sphere of activity of the Buddha'. So for the last five weeks we've been exploring this world. We've been exploring the strange - it might sometimes have seemed even the bizarre - the strange and wonderful world of the Sutra of Golden Light. We've started becoming a little familiar with it, started becoming familiar with some, at least, of its more prominent features. We've learned to adjust ourselves to its time-scale. We've got used, even, to what might have appeared at first sight as its inconsistencies. And we've also learned to recognise some of the inhabitants of that world, the world of the Sutra of Golden Light.

To begin with, there is the friendly, familiar figure of Ananda. Ananda, as you know, is always there. He is always in attendance on the Buddha, he is always listening, he is always remembering, always storing up the teaching in his mind, in his heart, so that he can repeat it, so that he can teach it to the other disciples later on. So there's the friendly, familiar figure of Ananda, who remembers the whole sutra, who was personally present when the events described in the sutra occurred. And then there's the Buddha, that is to say the Buddha, Sakyamuni. And then the Buddhas of the four directions. You may remember their names: Akshobya, Ratnaketu, Amitayus or Amitabha, and Dundubhisvara, the Lord of the Drum. Also we encountered, we met,

the Bodhisattva Ruciraketu, who had the wonderful dream. And then there was the brahmin Kaundinya. And in addition, various gods and goddesses. First there were the Four Great Kings, the four great kings that guard the four quarters, the four directions of space, the four directions of the universe: Dhrtarastra, Virudhaka, Virupaksa and Vaisravana. And then there were three goddesses: Sarasvati, Sri and Drdha, to say nothing of various non-human beings. There were dragons, *yaksas*, *kimnaras* and so on - many, many different kinds of non-human beings.

And we have become familiar not only with the inhabitants of this world of the Sutra of Golden Light; we have become familiar also with certain themes, with certain themes which resound again and again throughout the sutra, themes which may be enacted as it were on the stage of the sutra as well as being explicitly stated. For instance, there's the theme of the Golden Light itself. There's the theme of transformation, and there's the theme of protection. For the last two weeks we've been particularly concerned with the theme of protection. The week before last, the Four Great Kings came forward, and they promised to protect the sutra, and last week the great goddess Sarasvati came forward, and she promised to protect the sutra - or rather, promised to protect the monk who preached the sutra. So this week we are still concerned with the theme of protection. This week another great goddess comes forward, and she too promises to protect the sutra, promises to protect the monk who preaches the sutra.

Now this theme of protection is closely connected with the theme of transformation. The world is transformed when it submits to the Golden Light, when it becomes receptive to the Golden Light, when it places all its resources at the disposal of the Golden Light, at the service of the development of the individual, that is to say of the individual who is himself receptive to the Golden Light or who is trying to be receptive to the Golden Light. The four great kings, as we saw the week before last, represent, or rather their promise represents, the general principle of transformation - transformation of the world, transformation through submission; in fact, the promise of the four great kings represents the principle, as we saw, of spiritual hierarchy. They submit to the sovereignty of the spiritual forces that are above them. They submit to the Transcendental, submit to the Golden Light. At the same time, they exercise sovereignty over the earthly forces that are below them.

The three goddesses, or rather their promises - the promises of the three goddesses - represent the transformation of three different departments of human activity: again, transformation through submission. And, as we saw last week, Sarasvati's promise represents the transformation of culture. In the person of Sarasvati, culture surrenders its autonomy, as it were. Ethnic culture places itself at the service of universal religion, is ready to act as the medium of communication for the Golden Light. So this week another department of human activity is being transformed; another goddess is coming forward and promising to protect the sutra, promising to protect the monk who preaches the sutra.

Now the goddess who should have come forward this week is Sri - that is to say, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. In the sutra, chapter 8, the chapter on Sri, follows immediately after chapter 7, the chapter on Sarasvati. However, she - that is to say, Sri - will be coming forward next week, when we deal with Buddhist economics. This week it is Drdha, the earth goddess, who comes forward, because so far as these lectures are concerned it's more appropriate to deal with the goddesses in this order, that is to say first Sarasvati, then Drdha, and finally Sri. No disrespect, of course, is intended to the sutra. There's a definite reason why, in the sutra, the three goddesses appear in the order that they do. I'm not going to go into that tonight; some of you may be able to work it out for yourself. There are also going to be one or two other changes tonight. Last week I said quite a lot about the great goddess Sarasvati, quite a lot about her promise to protect the monk who preaches the sutra, but I said nothing about the monk himself. He remains simply an anonymous figure whom the goddess promises to protect. So tonight I shall have quite a lot to say about Drdha, the earth goddess, but I also intend to say something about the monk who preaches the sutra, the monk who is the medium for the transmission of the Golden Light. Not only that, I intend to say something about the Golden Light itself - just at least a few words.

So tonight we shall really be concerned with three themes or three topics. We'll be concerned in the first place with Drdha, the earth goddess; secondly, with the monk who preaches the sutra; and thirdly, with the Golden Light - or, in the terms of the title of tonight's lecture, we'll be concerned with, first of all nature, secondly man, thirdly Enlightenment. However, just to make things a little more difficult, not to say a little more

complicated, we'll not be concerned with them in that order. We're going to deal first with Drdha, the earth goddess or Mother Nature, then with the Golden Light or Enlightenment, and finally with the monk who preaches the sutra, that is to say with man.

But first we have to look at the sutra itself, have to look at chapter 10, the chapter on Drdha. We must see what the sutra has to say about her, what it has to say about her promise. The chapter begins, chapter 10 begins, rather abruptly: Then indeed the earth-goddess Drdha spoke thus to the Lord: - that is to say, to the Buddha. Now at once we notice something. Chapter 8, the chapter on Sri, begins in exactly the same way: Then indeed the great goddess Sri spoke thus to the Lord. But chapter 7, the chapter on Sarasvati, does not begin like this. So how does it begin? I wonder if anybody remembers from last week. How does it begin? Well, in case you've forgotten, it begins: Then indeed Sarasvati, the great goddess, covered one shoulder with her robe, placed her right knee on the ground, made the gesture of reverence in the direction of the Lord and spoke thus to the Lord.

So what's the difference? Sri, the goddess of wealth, and Drdha the earth-goddess, do not salute the Buddha before speaking, but Sarasvati does, as do the Four Great Kings, as does Samjnaya, the great general of the *yaksas*, in chapter 11. So what does the difference signify? Perhaps it signifies that Sri and Drdha are naturally less amenable to the influence of the Golden Light than is Sarasvati: in other words, that it is more difficult to transform the world of economics and the world of nature than it is to transform the world of culture. I hope this doesn't sound too far-fetched or too fanciful, but there surely is a meaning to be discovered in many of the minor details of the sutra.

However, let us proceed. Though she dispenses with the salutation, Drdha nonetheless makes her promise, and it's a long and beautiful promise. So what does she say? She says quite a number of things. I'll mention only some of the more important. First of all, she promises to come wherever the sutra is expounded. She promises to be present wherever the sutra is expounded. She says she will be there. Not only that, she says she will go up to the Dharma seat - that is to say, the seat on which the monk who is preaching the sutra is sitting - she will go up, she says, with her invisible body, her subtle, invisible body, and she will lean with her head upon the soles of the feet of the monk who is preaching the Dharma, that is to say preaching the Sutra of Golden Light. So the monk - we are not told this, but the monk is presumably seated cross-legged, seated on one of these rather high, raised Dharma seats, on one of these rather high throne-like seats, very nearly the height of a man, such as are still used even today, or at least until yesterday, in Tibet. So the goddess goes up to this throne, we are to imagine, this Dharma seat, she bows her head slightly, and she places it against the soles of the monk's feet. It could be, of course, that the monk is to be imagined sitting in European fashion as though in a chair, and in this case the goddess would stand placing her head directly beneath his feet. We mustn't forget that she's not present in her gross physical body, so she doesn't have to stand on the surface of the earth.

In either case, we are reminded of a well-known episode from the life of the Buddha, an episode that occurs shortly before he gained full Enlightenment. You may remember that the Buddha had seated himself on the *vajrasana*, that is to say the diamond seat or the diamond throne, and that *vajrasana*, that diamond seat or diamond throne, is regarded in Buddhist tradition as the symbolic centre of the universe. It's the seat on which all Buddhas sit, the spot on which all Buddhas sit when they gain Enlightenment, it's the spot on which all the previous Buddhas sat when they gained Enlightenment; so there the Buddha seated himself. He knew that his time had come. He knew that his hour had come, that he was going to attain Enlightenment that very night. So he seated himself on that spot, seated himself at the centre of the universe on the diamond seat, the diamond throne. So then what happened? What happened was that Mara appeared, Mara the evil one who had been dogging him, who had been following him from the very moment that he left home, from the very moment that he had left the group. Mara had been following him, in his own words, trying to find a way into the Buddha's mind. So there he was on that occasion. And he asked the Buddha what right he had to sit on that spot, what right he had to take his seat on the diamond throne; as if to say 'How do you know you are going to gain Enlightenment?' So the Buddha said that he had the right to sit there because he had practised the *paramitas*, he had practised the Perfections, for innumerable lives. He had practised generosity, ethics, patience, energy, meditation, wisdom - he had practised them all, not once but many, many times; not even in hundreds but in thousands, in tens of thousands of lives. So he was ready to gain Enlightenment, he had the

right to take his seat on the diamond throne. So Mara said, 'It's all very well to talk like that, it's all very well for you to make these claims that you've practised the *paramitas*, but after all who saw you? Who saw you doing all these wonderful things? Who saw you practising the *paramitas*?' So not only that, Mara said, 'Who is your witness?' He demanded a witness. So the Buddha said, 'The earth is my witness. All these actions of mine, all these deeds of mine, have been performed on the face of the earth, so the earth has seen, the earth goddess has seen.' So the Buddha just touched, or rather tapped, the earth with the tips of the fingers of his right hand, and at once the earth goddess, we are told, rose up out of the depths of the earth, and she bore witness. She said, 'Yes, I have seen it all. I have seen him' - not yet the Buddha, the Bodhisattva - 'practising all these *paramitas*. Therefore he is worthy to take his seat on the diamond throne.'

So the earth goddess, as she rises up, is usually depicted, in Buddhist art, as a beautiful woman of mature appearance, not particularly young without being actually old. And she is golden brown or dark green in colour, and she is usually represented with only the upper half of her body emerged from the earth, just like Mother Erda in Wagner's *The Ring*. And her hands are clasped in salutation. Occasionally, just occasionally, she is depicted or described as standing beside or beneath the *vajrasana* with her head placed against the soles of the Buddha's feet, just as the earth goddess is described in the sutra, the Sutra of Golden Light, in relation to the monk who preaches the sutra. But in whichever way she is depicted, in whichever way she is described, the significance is clear: the earth goddess is subordinated to the Buddha, subordinated to the monk who preaches the sutra. And this point is emphasised further by the symbolism of head and feet. The earth goddess places her head against the soles of the monk's feet. According to the ancient Indians, including the ancient Indian Buddhists, the head is the noblest, most worthy part of the whole body. The head is called, in Pali and Sanskrit, *uttama anga*, which means the superior limb or superior member. The feet, on the other hand, are the most ignoble and unworthy part, because after all, in ancient India, people went barefoot, their feet were often very dirty. So if you wanted to show respect for someone, you placed your head in contact with their feet; in other words, you subordinated what was highest in you to what is lowest in them, because if they were truly superior to you this would be the only way in which real contact between you could be established, the only way in which you could make yourself truly receptive to whatever they had to give.

We find the same kind of symbolism when we visualise Vajrasattva, the Bodhisattva or Buddha Vajrasattva, seated above our heads; or again when we visualise the line of gurus seated one on top of another, again above our heads. We make ourselves receptive to their spiritual influence by aligning ourselves with them vertically. As many of you know, it's still the custom in India to touch the feet of holy men, or first to touch their feet with one's fingers and then with the same fingers touch one's own head. The idea is that you take dust from their feet and you place it on your head. And many Indians show respect, not only to holy men but to parents, elders and even secular teachers, in the same way. And in the Buddhist countries we find much the same custom. The only difference is that in the Theravada countries there is no actual physical contact. What happens is that the lay people salute the monks, the monks salute the senior monks, their own teachers, first by kneeling down and then touching the ground in front of their feet with their own forehead. The principle, of course, is the same.

Now in India, and in the Buddhist countries of the East, there are quite a number of customs connected with heads and feet. We don't always realise this. For instance, one should never touch the head of someone whom you regard as superior to yourself, and above all you should never touch his head with your feet. This would be regarded in the Buddhist East as a sort of reversal of the natural order of things. In the same way, you should never sit with your feet stretched out, pointing in the direction of anyone whom you consider superior - not in the direction, for instance, of a Buddha image, especially in the shrine. Such behaviour would be considered grossly disrespectful and insensitive. There are many other customs, but it's time we passed on.

So the earth goddess has promised to lean with her head against the soles of the feet of the monk who is preaching the Dharma. So what else does she promise? She promises that she will feed on the nectar juice of the Dharma - that is to say, she promises that she will derive spiritual nourishment from the Dharma, spiritual nourishment from the Golden Light. She promises that she will do homage, that she will rejoice, that she will increase the savour of the earth. She will make the earth stronger so that trees, flowers, fruits, crops, will be made stronger; not only stronger but more tasty, more beautiful and more abundant. She promises all this. Not only that; the fact that the fruits and so on that the earth produces are more tasty, more beautiful, more

abundant, will affect the people who live on these things. They will increase, she says, their longevity, their strength, their complexion and senses, and they will then perform the numerous hundreds of thousands of activities appropriate to the earth. They will be devoted, she says, they will be thorough; they will do acts that have to be done with power. Thus the whole of Jambudvipa will become peaceful and prosperous. People will be happy. They will be endowed, she says, with brilliance, power, complexion and form, and their thoughts will then turn to the Sutra of Golden Light. They will approach members of the spiritual community, will approach them with a pure mind, and they will ask them to expound the sutra. And when the sutra is being expounded she herself, the earth goddess Drdha, together with her retinue, will become stronger and more powerful. The words she uses are almost the same as those used by the four great kings. She says, 'In our body there will be produced great power, fortitude and strength. Brilliance, glory and fortune will enter our body.' She will be satisfied, she says, with the nectar juice of the Dharma, and the earth will increase its savour, will become stronger. People who are dependent on the earth will increase and grow. They will experience various pleasures, various enjoyments. So everybody should be grateful to the earth, grateful to the earth goddess who has made all these things possible. They should also listen to the sutra, should listen to it respectfully. When they have listened to it they will talk about it. They will rejoice that they have heard the Dharma, rejoice that they have acquired merit, rejoice that they have pleased the Buddhas. They will also rejoice that they have escaped rebirth in lower states, that is to say rebirth in hell as an animal, in the world of Yama and among the hungry ghosts. They will rejoice, she says, that they are assured of rebirth among gods and men. Not only that; the goddess hopes that, after hearing the sutra, people will tell their friends and neighbours about it, will tell them whatever they remember of its teaching. When they do this, the earth will become stronger; people will become stronger. They will be blessed. They will have great wealth and great enjoyment, but they will be devoted to liberality, to *dana*, they will have faith in the Three Jewels.

So what do we see here? We see a sort of circular movement in the goddess's promise. First, the Sutra of Golden Light is preached. This nourishes the earth goddess. So nourished, she increases the savour and strength of the earth, and the people who live on the earth therefore become stronger and more prosperous. Because they are stronger and more prosperous, they become happy; because they are happy, they want to hear the sutra preached. When the sutra is preached, the goddess is nourished; when the goddess is nourished, she makes the earth stronger, and once again the whole process is repeated.

Now it's not surprising that the goddess's promise should take this circular form, this circular pattern. After all, the goddess is the earth goddess. She is nature; she is even Mother Nature. And nature's activity is essentially seasonal, is essentially cyclical. The earth goddess therefore represents change, mutability, especially cyclical change. She represents the cyclical process of action and reaction between opposites. She is conditioned existence. She is the *samsara*. She is the Wheel of Life.

However, we are going a little too fast. We'll deal with all that in a minute. We are not yet finished with the chapter, not yet finished with Drdha's promise. You will probably have noticed that in the course of her promise the goddess repeats the circular pattern three times, but each time it's repeated on a slightly higher level. At the end of the first repetition, people listen to the Sutra of Golden Light. At the end of the second repetition, they tell others about it. At the end of the third repetition, they develop faith in the Three Jewels. The goddess's head touches the Buddha's feet, touches the feet of the preacher of the Dharma. In other words, the circular movement is not completely circular: the circle is trying to become a spiral. In a sense, it is a spiral, but it is not a true spiral. On the true spiral, the true Spiral Path, that is to say, progress is irreversible. This spiral is reached when we pass the Point of No Return, when we achieve Stream Entry. On the true circle, there is no progress; that is to say, no permanent spiritual progress, no transcendental progress. But in between the two, in between the true spiral and the true circle, comes the section of the Path with which we are now concerned. On that section, spiritual progress does take place, but that progress is not irreversible. We can still fall back into the circle - into, that is to say, the true circle; can still fall back into a state in which we simply go round and round without making any progress at all.

Now we may remember from last week that in chapter 7 the great goddess Sarasvati promises that the monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen who hold the chief sutras, including the Sutra of Golden Light, will escape from the cycle of existence. But the goddess Drdha makes no such promise. She can only promise that beings will escape rebirth in the lower realms, that they will be reborn among gods and men, that they will have faith in

the Three Jewels. She can't even promise that they will go for Refuge. The earth goddess has her limitations. Nature can take us only so far. This is borne out by the remainder of the chapter. After Drdha has made her promise, the Buddha speaks. He says that those who hear even a single verse of the Sutra of Golden Light will be reborn among the group of thirty-three gods and others groups of gods. He says those who show honour to the sutra in various ways will be reborn in heavenly palaces made of the seven jewels. They will be reborn seven times in each palace, and they will experience inconceivable heavenly blessings. Drdha then speaks again. She repeats her promise, she prays that beings may continue to hear the sutra, that they may continue to experience inconceivable divine and human pleasures. Finally, she prays that they may awaken to supreme perfect Enlightenment, but this is only a prayer; it is not a promise. It is a prayer which she sees as being fulfilled in the infinitely remote future. From the standpoint of the natural order, Enlightenment is seen as a far-off divine event, not as a practicable possibility here and now. With this prayer, chapter 10, the chapter on the earth goddess Drdha, concludes.

Now I've not said much about the earth goddess, but you've probably been able to gather some idea of what she is like from what I have said. But I want to say just a little more about her before passing on to consider the Golden Light, also a little more about the significance of her promise. On the whole in the sutra she is rather a shadowy figure. As we saw last week, the sutra contains a vivid description of the great goddess Sarasvati in the form of a hymn of praise, but there is no corresponding hymn to Drdha. Similarly, the ritual worship of Sarasvati was described. The ritual worship of the great goddess Sri is also described, as we shall see next week. But there is no description of the ritual worship of Drdha. She remains shadowy, amorphous, unrecognised. In modern Hindu India, there is much the same sort of situation. Sarasvati is a highly popular goddess. She is worshipped all over India, especially by scholars, writers, students, as we saw last week. And Sri or Lakshmi is no less popular; if anything, she is even more popular than Sarasvati, even more widely worshipped. She is worshipped, to begin with, by all householders, especially by shopkeepers, businessmen, financiers and speculators in stocks and shares. They all worship Sri, they all worship Lakshmi. Other goddesses are also worshipped. There is Durga, the ten-armed slayer of the buffalo demon; then there's Kali, the Black One, who dances on the prostrate corpse of her husband - she who wears a garland of freshly-severed heads and whose red tongue hangs out and whose mouth drips with blood. There is also Sidhala, the dreaded goddess of smallpox. All these goddesses are worshipped by millions of people in India; they all have their shrine, they have their images, they have their priests. But Drdha is not worshipped. She has no shrine, no image, no priests; but the omission is more apparent than real. In a sense, all goddesses are earth goddesses, just as all gods are sky gods. Drdha is perhaps the original Indian earth goddess, not to say earth mother, before her various functions became differentiated. She is paralleled to some extent at least by similar figures in other lands, other cultures: by Rhea(?) and Demeter in ancient Greece; by Isis and Hathor in Egypt; by Ishtar in Babylonia; by Diana of the Ephesians, with her rows of breasts; and by Erda or Hertha in northern Europe. Also by Mlntsi(?) among the Mexicans. She is more closely paralleled, perhaps, by the various anonymous Neolithic figures, the so-called Neolithic Venuses, figures with enormous breasts and buttocks, with enormous wombs, but with only rudimentary heads. Like them, perhaps, Drdha represents the primitive reality behind the more sophisticated appearance; that is to say the more sophisticated appearance represented by some of the other goddesses.

But be that as it may, Drdha is not only a more shadowy figure than Sarasvati or Sri. She is also much less human. I have said that the three goddesses represent three different departments of human activity; that their promises to protect the sutra represent transformations of these departments, transformations achieved through placing them at the service of the Golden Light. But in the case of Drdha, this is only partly true. Her promise to protect the preacher of the sutra therefore has a somewhat different significance, a more complex significance.

Those human energies which are part of nature can be placed at the service of the Golden Light. They can be transformed. But nature herself cannot be placed at the service of the Golden Light. Nature herself cannot be transformed. All that we can transform is our attitude to nature, and that is sufficient. Our attitude to nature can be considered under three headings. First of all, our use of nature - that is to say, of natural resources and the environment, secondly, the appreciation of nature or enjoyment of nature, and thirdly the understanding of nature. I'll just say a few words about each of these in turn, and then proceed to the Golden Light.

First of all, our use of nature. In the first place, use of nature means use of natural resources, and nowadays we hear a great deal about this. The word ecology, for instance, is very much in the air. We are being warned that certain natural resources are finite and that we are using them all up at an alarming rate; more often than not, not only using them up at an alarming rate but using them in a most wasteful fashion. So Buddhists, those who try to follow the Dharma, should be very aware of this and should try to use everything of natural origin very carefully indeed; not only that, but use as little of it as is possible, and use it, moreover, in the best possible way - that is to say, for the benefit, the true benefit of self and others. The same principle applies to our use of the natural environment: we shouldn't destroy it or spoil it in any way, as, for instance, through pollution; and above all, we should think carefully before bringing about irreversible changes.

Now all this has become the commonplace of informed and responsible thinking. There is no need for me to elaborate. I am only concerned to underline the general principle involved, that is to say that the right use of nature is part of the spiritual life. But I would like to make specific mention of one particular misuse of nature, one that will be of special interest to all Buddhists, and that is the pollution of the environment by noise - one might even say the desecration of the environment by noise. Nowadays there is far too much noise, especially in big cities, but even little villages are not exempt. Even in little villages the jet planes rip through the air overhead and the 30-tonne articulated lorries thunder through the tiny main street. And under such circumstances, life becomes very difficult, and in particular meditation becomes very difficult. So Buddhists should be particularly aware of such problems, and should do whatever they can to reduce noise; even give active support to organisations working to this end.

Secondly, appreciation of nature or enjoyment of nature. This represents, we may say, the aesthetic attitude to nature, even the contemplative attitude to nature. Here there's no question of using nature. There's no question of doing anything with nature. You leave nature alone. You simply look at nature, you simply see nature. Here nature is simply appreciated for her own sake, enjoyed for her own sake, whether we are looking at a mountain, whether we are looking at the vast expanse of the sea, or whether we are looking at a tiny flower or just at a grain of sand. This sort of appreciation of nature is comparatively new in the West. In England, for instance, it became at all general only with the Romantic poets, especially with Wordsworth and Coleridge; and their time, of course, was the time of the industrial revolution, when there was a great upsurge of utilitarianism, when nature became used and misused more than ever before, perhaps, in history. So perhaps the emphasis which they gave on the appreciation of nature, the appreciation of natural beauty, was necessary to restore the balance, and that emphasis is still needed, especially by those who are trying to develop spiritually. There is no need to idealise nature or romanticise nature, much less still to sentimentalise it as even Wordsworth sometimes did, but there is no doubt that the appreciation of nature, especially of great natural beauty, can play an important part in the spiritual life. It can have a very soothing, a very tranquillising effect, even a restorative effect. We find this when we go away on retreat in the country. We find it even when we go out for a walk in the park on a fine afternoon.

Thirdly, understanding of nature. This understanding is not scientific; it's not even philosophical. Essentially, it's a spiritual understanding, and it consists in seeing nature as she really is. I have already touched on this. Nature is seasonal, nature is cyclic, nature is therefore *samsara*. Nature is the Wheel of Life: not as a static picture painted on a wall, but as a living, perpetually recurrent process. This process has no beginning. It is one of the axioms of Buddhism, one of the basic things as it were seen by the Buddhist spiritual vision, that *samsara* has no beginning, or rather that it has no perceptible beginning. It is important to understand this. In the West we are accustomed to thinking of everything as having a definite beginning. It must have begun some time or other; even nature itself, even mundane existence itself must have a beginning in time, or at least a beginning with time. Christians, for instance, traditionally believe that the world, the universe, had a definite beginning, when God created it out of nothing. They used to give, rather confidently, the date as 4004 BC, but this date has since been revised. But this - that is to say that things had a beginning, that things were created at a certain time, as it were - is not the Buddhist view.

According to Buddhism, nature has no perceptible beginning. *Samsara* has no perceptible beginning - and the operative word here is perceptible. Where there is a perceiving subject, there is an object, that is to say there is a world. The subject, therefore, cannot perceive the beginning of the world, cannot perceive the beginning of the *samsara*. The subject, the perceiving subject, can only go back and back in time indefinitely. It can

perceive a relative beginning; it can perceive a relative end; but it cannot perceive an absolute beginning, it cannot perceive an absolute end. It can perceive the beginning of a particular world, of a particular universe, but before that it will perceive another world, another universe; before that, another, and so on. And, according to Buddhist teaching, universes evolve over a period of many, many millions of years. They evolve from a subtle state to a gross state, and when they reach the height of their development the opposite process sets in - that is to say, the process of involution from a gross state to a subtle state. And this also takes many, many millions of years. Thus there are periods of expansion and periods of contraction. There are breathings in and breathings out of the cosmos, just like the breathings of the human body, the breathings of the human lungs, except that these cosmic inhalations and cosmic exhalations take millions of years. So the *samsara* is cyclic; conditioned existence is cyclic. But we must be careful that we don't become too abstract, not too remote. After all, we are still dealing with nature. In fact, we are dealing with the earth goddess.

Now the earth is not only cyclic, not only seasonal. It's also cold, also dark. It has no heat of its own, no light of its own. Nevertheless, it receives heat, it receives light. So where does it receive them from? It receives them from outside itself. It receives them from the principle which is the opposite to the earth. Not only opposite to the earth, but higher than the earth. If we think in terms of the earth, this higher principle is heaven. If we think in terms of nature, this higher principle is Enlightenment. If we think in terms of the changing, this principle is the unchanging. If we think in terms of the conditioned, this principle is the Unconditioned. If we think in terms of the mundane, this principle is the Transcendental. If we think in terms of *samsara*, this principle is *nirvana*. If we think in terms of darkness, this principle is light. And if we think in terms of *Drdha*, the earth goddess, this principle is the Golden Light, the light of truth, the light of Reality, the light of the Buddha, the light which is the truth, is Reality, is the Buddha. It's this same principle which the Buddha refers to in the *Udana*, when he says: There is, monks, an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an un compounded. If, monks, there were not here this unborn, unbecome, unmade, un compounded, there would not here be an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded. But because there is an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an un compounded, therefore there is an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded.

We thus have two principles. We have the compounded and the un compounded, the conditioned and the Unconditioned, *samsara* and *nirvana*; or, in terms of the present lecture, we have nature and Enlightenment, *Drdha* the earth goddess and the Golden Light. These two principles are separate and independent, at least within the subject/object framework. The one cannot be derived from the other, cannot be reduced to the other. *Samsara* is without perceptible beginning in time. There is no point, therefore, at which it is connected with *nirvana* as its effect. *Nirvana* is beyond time altogether, even as it is beyond space, so there is no point, no point in time, at which it is connected with *samsara* as its cause. Spiritual life consists in making the transition from one principle to the other, from *samsara* to *nirvana*, from nature to Enlightenment, from the conditioned to the Unconditioned. It consists in abandoning the ignoble quest for the noble quest, *anariyapariyesana* for *ariyapariyesana*. To quote the words of the historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, again, it consists in the conditioned pursuing the Unconditioned, not the conditioned pursuing the conditioned.

But who is it that makes the transition? Who is it that achieves the noble quest? It is man. It is the monk who is the preacher of the sutra, that is to say the Sutra of Golden Light. As I said at the beginning of the lecture the monk who is the preacher of the sutra is an anonymous figure. In three chapters a goddess comes forward and promises to protect the monk who preaches the sutra, but nothing whatever is said about the monk - at least, not in these chapters. It's as though he is simply a hook on which the goddesses hang their vows, hang their promises. However, something is said about him in chapter 13, the chapter on Susambhava - or rather, something is said about a preacher of the sutra, a monk called Ratnoccaya. In this chapter, the Buddha himself is speaking. He is speaking about his previous lives. He says that there was once a king called Susambhava, which means 'happily born' or 'born of happiness', and he was the ruler of all four continents. And one night he had a dream. In his dream he saw the monk Ratnoccaya. The name Ratnoccaya, incidentally, means 'jewel heap' or 'precious accumulation'. And the king saw him shining in the midst of the sun. Apparently he was brighter even than the sun, and he was expounding the Sutra of Golden Light. And on waking up, on waking up from his dream, the king felt extremely happy, and he went to see the Buddha's disciples, and he inquired after Ratnoccaya. Ratnoccaya, at that time, was elsewhere. He was sitting in a cave. He was studying and reflecting on the Sutra of Golden Light. So the disciples took the king to Ratnoccaya. The king worshipped

Ratnoccaya, and we are told he worshipped his feet, and he invites him to expound the Sutra of Golden Light, and Ratnoccaya agrees to do this. So the king very joyfully makes all the appropriate preparations and Ratnoccaya expounds the sutra. The king, needless to say, is greatly impressed, greatly moved. He is so impressed, so moved, that he sheds tears of joy, and eventually he presents all his possessions, all his property; he presents, we are told, the four continents filled with jewels, to the Order - to the Order of Ratnasikhin, who was the Buddha at that time. The Buddha, Sakyamuni, then reveals that he himself was Susambhava, and that the Buddha Akshobya was Ratnoccaya.

So here something at least is said about the preacher of the sutra, or about a preacher of the sutra, and what is said underlines one particular point. The preacher of the sutra is always a monk, always a *bhikshu*. The great goddess Sarasvati promises to protect 'the monk' who preaches the sutra. The earth goddess Drdha promises to protect 'the monk' who preaches the sutra, as does the great goddess Sri, as we shall see next week. So this raises two questions. What is a monk? And why should a monk in particular be the preacher of the sutra?

Now we must remember that the Sutra of Golden Light is a Mahayana sutra, and the Mahayana invariably attaches more importance to the spirit than to the letter of the Buddha's teaching, though this does not mean that ignores or neglects the letter. In the same way, in the same spirit, it attaches more importance to the realities of the spiritual life than it does to the appearances of the spiritual life. For the Mahayana, therefore, the monk is not just one who observes certain minor disciplinary precepts; not someone who shaves his head and wears a yellow robe, though he may of course also do these things - these things are not excluded. The monk, according to the Mahayana, is one who is totally committed to the spiritual life, totally committed to his personal spiritual development, totally committed to the noble quest, the quest for the Unconditioned, and committed to it not for his own sake only but for the sake of all living beings. The Mahayana monk is therefore a Bodhisattva, at least in intention. He is a Bodhisattva even if the Bodhicitta has not actually arisen.

Now you cannot be totally committed unless you are free. Only a free man can commit himself. You cannot be totally committed unless you are free from all mundane ties, all mundane responsibilities. So what are the two biggest mundane ties, the two biggest mundane responsibilities? So far as a man at least is concerned, they are, first, a wife and family, and two, wage-earning work; and the two, of course, usually go together. The monk, therefore, is celibate, that is to say he is unmarried, he has no wife, no children, no family ties, no family responsibilities. The English word monk means one who is on his own, one who is single, solitary, alone. But this does not necessarily mean that he is a hermit. He may in fact be living as a member of a spiritual community, may be living as a member of a monastic community. The fact that he is alone, the fact that he is a monk, means that he does not belong to any mundane group, not belong to any group that is held together by purely mundane ties of blood, emotional dependence, or common worldly interests. Within the spiritual community, one can be alone and one can be with others. Within the group, however, one is neither alone nor with others.

The monk has also no worldly occupation. He is not gainfully employed. He doesn't work for a living. He doesn't make anything, he doesn't produce anything, he doesn't earn anything. Economically speaking, he is a parasite. He is a spiritual, one might even say a glorious spiritual parasite. He depends for food and clothing and so on on others, as we shall be seeing in the course of next week's lecture. So the monk is one who leads a purely spiritual life, who is totally committed to a spiritual life, who has no worldly ties, no worldly responsibilities. The monk therefore lives what some of the old Christian writers called the angelic life. Monks live as it were in heaven. They live like angels. In heaven there is neither marriage nor giving in marriage, no ploughing or sowing or reaping, so the monastic life is therefore the happy life. And I can testify to this from my own experience and observation, at least so far as Buddhist monks are concerned - I can't answer for the others. In fact, I've no hesitation in saying that monastic life is the best and happiest of all lives. In India I not only lived as a monk myself; I had contact with monks of many different schools and many different nationalities - Theravada monks and Mahayana monks, Zen monks, Nichiren monks, Gelugpa monks, Nyingmapa monks. Some were Sinhalese, some were Burmese; there were Thais, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Chinese, Tibetans, Nepalese. And what was one thing that one noticed about them? They were all noticeably more happy than the lay people, even more happy than the Buddhist lay people. The Buddhist lay people were happy enough in all conscience, compared with the Hindus, but the Buddhist monks were even

happy than the Buddhist lay people.

Now you might think this odd. After all, the lay people had wives, children, jobs, money, motor cars, all conceivable pleasures and enjoyments, etc.; but more often than not, one saw, they looked quite miserable. The monks usually had none of these things. Most monks, indeed, that I met, that I knew, owned little more than their robes, their begging bowl and a few books; maybe a fountain pen or even the odd camera. And many of them took no solid food after midday at all; after midday they took only tea. Some of them were so strict they didn't even take milk in their tea. Yet they were all remarkably happy, remarkably contented, and remarkably friendly. It was really a joy to be with them. However, I won't say anything more; I might get carried away by the flood of reminiscences; I might even want to go back to India!

Anyway, I hope that you now have some idea of what a monk is - that is to say, a real monk, a real *bhikshu*, not just someone who has formally received monastic ordination. The monk is one who is totally committed to the spiritual life, who has no worldly ties or worldly responsibilities, who is celibate, that is to say unmarried, without wife and children, who does not work for a living, who is supported by others, who receives food and clothing and so on from others. Moreover, the monk is one who leads an angelic life, who is happy. In other words, the monk is one who has made the transition from the conditioned to the Unconditioned, from *samsara* to *nirvana*, from nature to Enlightenment, or who is very definitely in process of making that transition. The monk is one who has at least set out on the noble quest.

But, of course, it's not easy to make the transition from the conditioned to the Unconditioned. It's not easy to leave *samsara* behind, however miserable. It's not easy to give up the world. After all, *samsara* is not only outside us; the world is not only outside us; they are also within us. Man is a being with a dual nature. On the one hand, he is the child of earth; on the other, he is the offspring of heaven. He is part of nature, but at the same time he transcends nature. He feels the gravitational pull of the conditioned; he also feels the gravitational pull of the Unconditioned. So man is a being in conflict, in conflict with himself, in conflict within himself. We may even go so far as to say that man is a battleground. He is a battleground of opposing forces. There is a great battle taking place in man himself. The forces of nature are fighting as it were with the forces of Enlightenment, *Drdha* the earth goddess with the Golden Light.

So the monk is one in whom this conflict has been resolved, in whom this battle has been won. The monk is one whose natural energies have submitted to the Golden Light, are completely at the service of the Golden Light. The monk is one who in Christian phraseology has overcome the world. So it's obvious now why the monk is the preacher of the sutra, the preacher of the Sutra of Golden Light. It is obvious why the earth goddess places her head against the soles of his feet. Only he can be the preacher of the Sutra of Golden Light who has identified himself with the Golden Light. The monk has made the transition from the conditioned to the Unconditioned, from *samsara* to *nirvana*, from nature to Enlightenment, or is in process of making it. He has identified himself with the Golden Light, become as it were one with the Golden Light, at least to some extent, so he is able to be the preacher of the Sutra of Golden Light. Ultimately, of course, it is the Buddha himself who is the preacher of the sutra. It is the Buddha himself who is protected. Nowadays, unfortunately, we may say, the earth goddess has got out of control. Nature has got out of control; not, of course, nature outside man except so far as this has been disturbed by man himself. It is nature inside man that has got out of control. It is the natural human energies that have got out of control. The conditioned pursues the conditioned relentlessly. Hardly anyone pursues the Unconditioned. Emphasis is almost exclusively on material values. But if civilisation is not to collapse, if mankind is not to destroy itself even, there must be a very, very much stronger emphasis on spiritual values. There must be a revival of spiritual life, and by 'spiritual life' I mean real spiritual life, not just the old conventional religiosity, which we have, or should have, outgrown.

What we need, in fact, we may say, is an uncompromising assertion of the monastic ideal in the truest and best sense. What we really need are more monks, more preachers of the Sutra of Golden Light, more people who understand the true relation between nature, man and Enlightenment.

Checked December 2000