

Lecture 144: Building the Buddha Land

Mr Chairman and Friends,

Last week as I expect most of you remember, we started experiencing for ourselves, something of what I called 'The Magic of a Mahayana Sutra'. The Sutra in question being of course, the text known as *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*, or 'Teaching of Vimalakirti', the sage of Vaisali.

And this week we take up the first of our themes drawn from that extraordinary work, *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*. We're considering this week the topic of 'Building the Buddha Land', and we're going to consider it quite systematically, going to consider it I hope, fairly thoroughly, under five main headings:

First of all, what is the Buddha Land? I'm sure you'd all like to know.

Two. Who builds it?

Three. Why does he build it?

Four. With what does he build it? And

Fifthly, and lastly, this is of course very important - How does he build it?

It's pretty obvious that these five questions overlap to some extent, in fact to a considerable extent, and therefore the answers to these questions also will overlap to some extent. That I think is inevitable, and in any case we may say quite categorically, that in the spiritual life of the individual, there can be no question of hard and fast divisions and separations anyway.

But before considering this evening's topic of building the Buddha Land under these five headings, I want to go back just a little bit. I want to provide just a little bit of background information if you like, especially for the benefit of those who weren't here last week. 'Building the Buddha Land' is a theme, as I've said, taken from *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*, and it's taken from the first chapter of that work, which is entitled 'Purification of the Buddha Field'. And we're going to consider it within that specific context, and this will involve acquainting ourselves with certain crucial passages in that first chapter of *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*.

Before doing that however, I want to say just a few words, again for the benefit of those who weren't here last week, a few words about the expression 'a Mahayana Sutra'. The Mahayana, as I think most of you by this time appreciate, is the particular historical and doctrinal form of Buddhism. The word means literally 'great way' or 'great vehicle', and it's that form of Buddhism, which sets, we may say, no limit, no limit whatever, to the spiritual potential of the individual, the individual's potential for spiritual development. It's that form of Buddhism which encourages all living beings to aim at the highest conceivable - in fact, as we saw last week - the highest inconceivable goal of the spiritual life - in other words at what is traditionally known as 'supreme perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all'. And one who aims at 'supreme perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all' is of course known as a Bodhisattva.

A Sutra is a particular type of Buddhist canonical text. It's not primarily a literary document - rather it's a literary record, not to say, a literary recension of a previously existing oral tradition. Very broadly speaking, a Mahayana Sutra is a Sutra in which the Buddha, Shakyamuni, Gautama the Buddha, is represented as teaching, directly or indirectly, the Bodhisattva Ideal, or the ideal of supreme perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings. So *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa* is a Mahayana Sutra, though not quite in the usual sense. It might in fact be helpful if we were to regard *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa* simply as a work of sublime spiritual imagination, without perhaps attaching to it that suggestion of authoritativeness, which the word 'Sutra' perhaps conveys.

So back to Chapter 1 of *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*. As we saw last week, the scene opens in Amrapali's Park, in Amrapali's garden, in the garden which Amrapali, the erstwhile courtesan had donated to the Buddha and his disciples, towards the end of her life, the park, the garden, on the outskirts of the city of Vaisali. And the Buddha was staying there with a great assembly, a great concourse of his disciples. The text tells us that there were 8,000 monks, all in their yellow robes, all shaven headed, presumably all with their begging bowls ready, all of whom were Arahants, that is to say, they'd all gained individual enlightenment, all 8,000 of them. In traditional Buddhist art, the Arahant is usually represented as a wrinkled old man, in fact an old man bowed down with age, and sometimes even with a staff. There were also 32,000 Bodhisattvas, in addition to the 8,000 monks who were Arahants. 32,000 Bodhisattvas, and the Bodhisattvas are usually represented in traditional Buddhist art as beautiful young princes, 16 years of age. The text mentions 56 Bodhisattvas by name, and among them we have Ratnakuta, and Ratnapani, and Devaraja, and Ratanapriya, and Indarajala, Avalokitesvara, Mahastamaprapda, Manjusri, and

Maitreya. These are just some of the 56 names which are actually mentioned of Bodhisattvas present. And in addition there are 10,000 Brahmas, Brahmas being a very elevated kind of god indeed. And also, 12,000 Shakras or Indras who are gods ruling over heavens of the 33 gods, as well as all sorts of other powerful god - I'm not going to enumerate them - all sorts of gods, and what we would regard as mythological beings almost in some cases, mythological beasts, as well as ordinary monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. So that the Buddha, the text says, was surrounded and venerated by many hundreds of thousands of living beings.

And the Buddha sat on the majestic Lion throne, in the midst of the assembly, teaching the Dharma. As the text says, "Dominating all the multitudes, just as Sumeru, the king of mountains, looms high over the oceans, the Lord Buddha shone, radiated and glittered as he sat upon his magnificent lion throne." So that's the opening scene; that's the setting as it were. And then the text goes on to say that at this point, when the Buddha was seated there, in the midst of this wonderful assembly of Arahants and Bodhisattvas and so on, teaching or ready to teach the Dharma, at this point the Bodhisattva Ratnakara arrives from Vaisali, from the city of Vaisali, just a mile or two distant. Ratnakara by the way means 'mine of jewels' in the sense of mine of precious qualities. And Ratnakara the Bodhisattva did not come alone. He came accompanied by no less than 500 Licchavi youths, - the Licchavis being a tribe of people whose capital was Vaisali - accompanied by 500 Licchavi youths, and it must have been quite a wonderful sight, quite a marvellous sight, because each of these youths, according to the text, is holding a parasol - a parasol formed of the seven jewels; so just imagine it if you can. And all of them as they arrive, or upon their arrival, all 500 of them plus Ratnakara, they salute the Buddha, and carrying their 500 precious parasols, they circumambulate the Buddha, that is to say they march round him 7 times, keeping him all the time on their right as a mark of respect. This is one of the ancient Indian ways of showing respect - you often find it mentioned in Buddhist texts, that they circumambulated the Buddha or the Stupa, or whatever, that is to say, they went round it, and round it, 3 times, or 7 times, or 9 times, keeping it on their right. So this is what they did on this occasion - they circumambulate the Buddha 7 times, and then, having done that, they offer their parasols to the Buddha. And the text says that by his magical power, the Buddha transforms all of those parasols, all 500 of them, into a single precious canopy, and this canopy we're told, is so enormous in size that it covers the entire billion world galaxy, and the entire contents, we are further told, of the billion world galaxy reflected in the interior of the canopy so that you can see them all just as you look up into it you see their limitless suns, moons and stars, limitless heavenly realms, limitless mount Sumerus, limitless oceans and rivers, limitless villages and cities, limitless people, and limitless Buddhas teaching the Dharma. And the sound of the voices of all these Buddhas can be distinctly heard echoing in the interior of the canopy. So not unnaturally, the assembly is astonished and delighted at this extraordinary vision, and they all bow down before the Buddha.

And then the Bodhisattva Ratnakara praises the Buddha in a beautiful, well we can only call it in English, a hymn: it's a 'praising' a stuti, and this hymn is not unnaturally, intensely devotional, full of great devotional feeling towards the Buddha, full of reverence, full of admiration, full of joy, but at the same time, and this is one of the extraordinary features of these Mahayana hymns, in fact we may say of the Mahayana generally, at the same time it is profoundly philosophical in content. The devotion does not exclude the philosophy, the as it were intellectual element. The intellectual element does not exclude the feeling, the devotion. And there's one particular verse which is especially philosophical, and this verse summarizes we may say, some of the insights that we were talking about last week in our first talk.

Ratnakara says in the verse,

"All these things arise dependently from causes, yet they are neither existent, nor non-existent; therein is neither ego, nor experience, not doer, yet no action, good or evil, loses its effects; such is your teaching",

he says, addressing the Buddha. And then, having praised the Buddha in this long and beautiful, this devotional but at the same time philosophical hymn, Ratnakara asks the Buddha a question, and he asks it on behalf of the 500 young Licchavis, those 500 Licchavi youths who've accompanied him. And these young Licchavis by the way, the text tells us, have set themselves on the path to supreme perfect enlightenment, in other words, they've taken the Bodhisattva Vow. And Ratnakara speaking on their behalf wants the Buddha to explain to them the purification of the Buddha Field of the Bodhisattvas. In other words, he wants to know, they want to know, how to set about building the Buddha Land.

So the Buddha is quite pleased with this question, and he answers at some length. He says to begin with, he says,

"Noble sons, a Buddha Field of Bodhisattvas is a field of living beings. Why so? A Bodhisattva embraces a Buddha Field to the same extent that he causes the development of living beings. He embraces a Buddha Field to the same extent that living beings become disciplined. He embraces a Buddha Field to the same extent that, through entrance into a Buddha Field, living beings are introduced to the Buddha-gnosis. He embraces a Buddha Field to the same extent that, through entrance into that Buddha Field, living beings increase their holy spiritual faculties. Why so? Noble sons, a Buddha Field of Bodhisattvas springs from the aims of living beings.

For example, Ratnakara, should one wish to build in empty space, one might go ahead, in spite of the fact that it not possible to build or to adorn anything in empty space. In just the same way, should a Bodhisattva, who knows full well that all things are like empty space, wish to build a Buddha Field, in order to develop living beings, he might go ahead in spite of the fact that it is not possible to build or to adorn a Buddha Field in empty space."

The Buddha then goes on to say that a Bodhisattva's Buddha Field is a field of positive thought; a field of high resolve; a field of virtuous application; a field of the Six Perfections; a field of the Four Immeasurables: that is to say, friendliness, compassion, joy and equanimity. A field of the 37 aids to enlightenment; a field of the ten precepts etc etc. And he concludes by saying of the Bodhisattva:

"His virtuous application is tantamount to his high resolve; his high resolve is tantamount to his determination; his determination is tantamount to his practice; his practice is tantamount to his total dedication; his total dedication is tantamount to his liberative technique; his liberative technique is tantamount to his development of living beings; and his development of living beings is tantamount to the purity of his Buddha Field. The purity of his Buddha Field reflects the purity of living beings; the purity of the living beings reflects the purity of his gnosis ; the purity of his gnosis reflects the purity of his doctrine; the purity of his doctrine reflects the purity of his transcendental practice; and the purity of his transcendental practice reflects the purity of his own mind".

There then follows a conversation between the Buddha, Sariputra, and the Brahma, the great god Sikkhī, because Sariputra is unable to understand how the Buddha's own Buddha Field should be so impure, and he thinks that it might be because the Buddha's mind had been impure. However, there's no need to go into that. This then is the background of the theme, the Sutra background of the theme which we're taking up this evening, that is to say, the theme of building the Buddha Land. This is the situation out of which the theme arises. And as I've already said, we're going to consider the theme under five headings; we're going to be answering five questions, and answering them with the help of the passages from the first chapter of *The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* which I've just read.

Before going onto those passages though, I want to say just a few words about a certain incident which we've just read about, or heard about. The 500 Licchavi youths are described as holding 500 precious parasols. You can also translate as 'umbrellas' the word is Chattrā, and they offer these 500 parasols to the Buddha. And the Buddha transforms them all into a single precious canopy, which covers the entire billion world galaxy. So what does all this mean? Surely it has some meaning. What is its significance? I don't want to suggest that it's a question of a simple, as it were one-to-one point-by-point allegorical pseudo-Jungian interpretation of the incident. I just want to offer a few pointers, a few suggestions.

The 500 parasols, borne aloft, so brilliant, and so colourful, these surely represent the spiritual aspirations of those 500 Licchavi youths - in particular, their aspiration to supreme perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. In other words, the parasols represent the Bodhicitta - the arisen Bodhicitta, the thought of, or will to, supreme perfect enlightenment. So the Licchavi youths offer these parasols to the Buddha, and there are 500 youths, which means 500 parasols, so you might say 500 Bodhicittas so to speak. But they're all offered to the Buddha. In other words, the aspirations of the youths, their spiritual aspirations, their Bodhicittas, all have one and the same object, and that object is of course, supreme perfect enlightenment, as represented by the Buddha himself, as he sits there. So what does the Buddha do? He transforms those parasols into a single canopy. The fact that the spiritual aspirations of the Licchavi youths have one and the same object acts as a unifying force. It means that their aspirations tend to converge, tend even to unite, tend to become one single aspiration. So what then is that one single aspiration? What in other words, does the great canopy represent? It represents what may be called, provided we don't take the expression too literally, provided we take it poetically, rather than dogmatically, what may be called the 'Cosmic Bodhicitta'. And of course the entire billion world galaxy is reflected in the canopy, which means that the cosmic Bodhicitta is aware of, and responsive to the

needs of all sentient beings. At the same time, it's not anything as it were collective, yet it's not anything individual, this cosmic Bodhicitta, in the ordinary sense. It belongs to that same mysterious category for which we have as yet no word, that same category to which belongs the expression, 'spiritual community'.

The significance of this incident of the parasols can also be explained in more ordinary everyday terms. We can say that to the extent that our spiritual aspirations have a common object, they will be united, and to the extent that they are united, they will be a force for good, active and operative in the world.

So now for the first main heading under which we're going to consider the topic of building the Buddha Land. So what is the Buddha Land? In order to answer this question, it will be necessary to say a few words about Buddhist cosmology. I won't say very much about it, because I've dealt with the subject at some length in "A Survey of Buddhism" as well as in the course of the eight lectures of "The Sutra of Golden Light".

The first thing that we have to realize, the first thing that we have to appreciate, is that Buddhism, traditional Indian Buddhism, sees space as infinite, and it sees infinite space as occupied by infinite worlds, infinite world systems, each world system consists of four continents, surrounded by a ring of iron mountains. Don't take all this too literally, it's sort of poetic imagery you may say. Each world system also contains 3 planes: a plane of sensuous desire; a plane of pure form, and a formless plane. So each world system is thus multi-dimensional. A thousand such world-systems, according to Buddhist cosmology, make up one small universe. A thousand small universes make up one middling universe, and a thousand middling universes make up one great universe; you can go further than that, but we won't this evening. A Buddha Land corresponds to one great universe or to a multiple thereof. In other words, if that isn't quite clear, it corresponds to one great universe, or it may be even bigger. And it's called a Buddha Land because it represents the sphere of influence, the sphere of spiritual influence of one particular Buddha; and that particular Buddha is responsible for the spiritual development of all the living beings in all the world systems within that great universe, or number of great universes. So one can see from all this that Buddhism teaches not only an infinity of world systems, but also, an infinity of Buddhas, or at least, if that sounds too outrageous, at least a plurality, a very considerable plurality of Buddhas.

But not all the great universes are so fortunate as to have a Buddha presiding over them, so to speak. Some, unfortunately are devoid of a Buddha. And at this point we have to remember that for the Mahayana no less than for the Hinayana, the Buddha is not some sort of God. He starts off as an ordinary human being, just like anybody else. He takes up the spiritual life; he takes the Bodhisattva vow - that is to say the vow to attain supreme perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all; and he follows the Bodhisattva path for thousands upon thousands of lives; And he follows it within the world systems of one particular great universe - the universe for which one day he will have the spiritual responsibility. And in the course of that time, in the course of all those thousands of lives, he comes into contact with an enormous number of living beings, and he helps them to the best of his ability. And eventually of course, after those thousands upon thousands of lives of spiritual endeavour as a Bodhisattva, he becomes a Buddha, in his last life-time.

Now there's a distinction made in the Mahayana tradition between a Buddha's sphere of knowledge, and his sphere of influence. A Buddha's sphere of knowledge is coterminous with the whole of conditioned existence, but his sphere of influence is limited so to speak, to one or more great universes. In respect of his supreme perfect enlightenment however, one Buddha does not differ from another Buddha. In a sense therefore, all Buddha Lands are one Buddha Land. Incidentally the word for Buddha Land in Sanskrit is 'Buddha-ksetra'; 'ksetra' means 'field' and a field of course is something which is cultivated - it's something in which seeds are planted. And the use of the word 'ksetra' - the word 'field' in this connection suggests that living beings, that is to say the inhabitants of the Buddha-ksetra are like plants, and the Buddha is so to speak the great cosmic gardener; and the Mahayana texts in fact repeatedly describe the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as 'maturing' or 'ripening' living beings - in other words leading them, gradually step by step, to spiritual perfection. This sort of imagery, imagery of the field, the plant, growth, development, this sort of imagery is found very early in the history of Buddhism. You may remember that shortly after his enlightenment, our Buddha, as we usually call him, Shakyamuni or Gautama the Buddha, saw all living beings just like lotus flowers at various stages of development - some sunk deep in the mud; others just beginning to rise out of the mud; some just buds and others half-opened blossoms - even in a few cases, almost completely open. This is how he saw them, how he saw living beings, how he saw humanity, shortly after his enlightenment. And similarly in 'The White Lotus

Sutra', there the Buddha is depicted as the sun, shining on all beings alike; and his Dharma, or teaching is described as being just like the rain - it falls upon all. And living beings of course are like the trees and shrubs and other plants. And when the rain falls, when the rain of the Dharma falls, they all grow, they all flourish, they all develop, each in his own way.

So we find this same kind of imagery of growth and development in connection with the Buddha Land, or Buddhafield. There's also a distinction made between the pure Buddha Land, and the impure Buddha Land. The impure Buddha Land is one in which all six realms of sentient existence are found - that is to say: the realm of the gods; the realm of men; the realm of the Asuras or anti-gods; the realm of the hungry ghosts; the realm of tormented beings; and the realm of animals. In the impure Buddha Lands, food and clothing are difficult to obtain. In them, it's difficult to hear the Dharma, difficult to come into contact with the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. In short, the impure Buddha Land, is one in which conditions on the whole are not conducive to spiritual development; one in which it's difficult for living beings to evolve, difficult for them to follow the path to enlightenment.

Our own Buddha Land in which Shakyamuni, Gautama the Buddha, gained enlightenment, is, and no doubt this comes as no surprise to you, an impure Buddha Land. It's described in the Mahayana Sutras as 'a dirty, disagreeable, dangerous place', and Bodhisattvas belonging to other Buddha Lands are warned to be very careful when passing through it! A pure Buddha Land is of course the exact opposite of an impure Buddha Land; apart from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, it contains only gods and men; food and clothing appear spontaneously, without anyone having to work to produce them. It's very easy to hear the Dharma; it's very easy to come in contact with Buddhas and Bodhisattvas - so in short, the pure Buddha Land is one in which conditions are highly conducive to spiritual development - one in which it is easy for living beings to evolve, easy for them to follow the path to enlightenment.

The best-known example of a pure Buddha Land is of course Sukhavati - the 'happy land' or the 'land of bliss' which is the Buddha Land of Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, and it's situated in, we are told, the Western direction. And we're told it's very beautiful, there are very lengthy descriptions in certain Buddhist texts, certain Buddhist Sutras - I'm not going to go into them in detail - but Sukhavati, the happy land, the land of bliss, this Pure Land of the Buddha Amitabha, is described in the Sutras, in the texts, entirely in terms of flashing jewels, in terms of light, in terms of lotus flowers, in terms of music and perfume. As I've said there's no time to go into details, one can find the details in the three so-called 'Pure Land' Sutras. And in the midst of Sukhavati, there sits the Buddha Amitabha, golden in colour, he sits on a magnificent flowery throne, and is flanked by his two chief Bodhisattvas, that is to say by Avalokitesvara, and Mahasthamaprapta. And beings appear in Sukhavati, as they do in other Pure Lands, by way of apparitional birth - that is to say, not as a result of sexual union. And having appeared, they see Amitabha and his Bodhisattvas before them, and they've nothing to do but listen to Amitabha's teaching, nothing to do but to grow, nothing to do but to develop.

The distinction between pure and impure Buddha Lands is not however absolute. It's possible we are told, for the Buddhas to transform an impure Buddha Land into a pure Buddha Land, and viceversa. And the purification of the Buddha Land is in fact equivalent to building the Buddha Land. At the same time it is also said, that in the ultimate sense, all Buddhafields are pure. The Buddhas see them as pure, even if ordinary beings do not. Again it's also possible for a Bodhisattva to create a pure Buddha Land in the midst of an impure Buddha Land. Vimalakirti's house, as described in the seventh chapter of *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*, is a pure Buddha Land of this sort. Now there's a lot more that could be said on the subject of the Buddha Land - I've touched on only a few salient points, but it's time we passed on to the second heading, the second question, which is: "Who builds the Buddha Land"?

Now this should be evident from what has already been said. It's the Bodhisattva who builds the Buddha Land. That is to say who builds the pure Buddha Land. It's the Bodhisattva who sets up the ideal environment for the leading of the spiritual life. It's the Bodhisattva who purifies the Buddha Land as the text has it, and of course, a Buddha can create a Pure Land too, but generally, it is the Bodhisattva who does so. And he does so in fulfilment of his Bodhisattva vow, which of course is to attain supreme perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings.

Now we've been speaking of the Bodhisattva in the singular. I've said that 'he' builds the Buddha Land. But at the beginning of one of the passages which I quoted Ratnakara asks the Buddha to explain the Bodhisattvas' (that is 's' apostrophe not apostrophe 's') purification of the Buddha Field, and the Buddha said in reply: "I will explain to you the purification of the Buddha Field of the Bodhisattvas" (Plural).

So Bodhisattvas are spoken of in this particular passage, in the plural. It is they apparently, who will purify the Buddha Field, it is they who will build the Buddha Land. And further on, the Buddha says: "Noble sons, a Buddha Field of Bodhisattvas springs from the aims of living beings" - again the plural form: not Bodhisattvas though, but 'living beings' this time. But in both cases, the plural form is used.

So what does this mean? An advanced Bodhisattva, according to the Mahayana, is quite capable of purifying the Buddha Land, of building the Buddha Land single handed as it were - it's not beyond his capacity, just as the magician is capable of creating the magical elephant single handed, as we saw last week. But what would be the use? You can create a Buddha Land, can give people a glimpse of it, can even keep them in it for a little while. But you can't keep them in it indefinitely. You can't even keep them in it for very long. Not even if you're a Bodhisattva. So why is this? Well it's because they don't want to stay in it indefinitely! They don't feel at home in it; they're not ready for it! And there's a little Indian story that illustrates this point.

In this story, after all the sublime things that we've been hearing about Buddha Lands, and Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we do come rather down to earth but never mind. The story is about a woman who sold fish. She apparently lived in a small village on the banks of a big Indian river, and every week she took her fish to the market. And she took her fish to the market in a big wicker basket. And one week for some reason or other, it took, you know how these things happen - especially those of you who have ever worked on the stalls - it took her rather a long time to sell her fish. So she decided that rather than make her way back to her village so very late at night, she'd better stay in that market town overnight. So fortunately she found a flower shop open - still open; you know what an Indian flower shop is like: it doesn't sell cut flowers in bunches as our flower shops do; usually Indian flower shops sell very sweet-smelling garlands of flowers, and little bunches of flowers for the ladies to put in their hair; but they're always very very sweet-scented indeed.

So fortunately this woman who had just managed to sell her fish, she found the flower shop open still, and the flower seller was very sympathetic, the shop keeper was very sympathetic, and he allowed her to spend the night in his shop. So quite late at night she lay down to sleep among the flowers - the sweet-smelling flowers. But she tossed and she turned and she couldn't sleep. She couldn't bear the scent of the flowers - they were so sweet, so beautiful! So what did she do? We're told she got her old fish basket which of course was smelling of fish, and she put it right next to her, right by her nose. And after that, she slept quite soundly. So we might laugh at the woman who sold fish, but we ourselves are in just the same position. She felt uncomfortable in the flower shop amongst all those sweet-smelling flowers. But we would feel no less uncomfortable in the Pure Land. We'd want to introduce some equivalent of her smelly old fish basket into the Pure Land. We'd want to introduce some distraction - some physical or mental distraction - probably want to bring our T.V. set or our motor-bike or our record-collection, or our girl-friend, or our office files. We'd then feel more comfortable, more at home, but then of course, the Pure Land would no longer be the Pure Land. So the Bodhisattva cannot keep people in the Buddha Land indefinitely; he can't keep them in it very long. He can't keep them in it against their will - that would be a contradiction in terms anyway, because the spiritual life is essentially the autonomous life, the free life, the life of emancipation.

So what is he to do? What is the Bodhisattva to do? There can't be any question of his creating a Buddha Land by his magical power, and then holding people in it. He may do this for a short while, but not for very long. They'll soon start getting uncomfortable, and then, no more Buddha Land. The Buddha Land therefore, has to be a joint creation. It has to be built by a number of people working together. It has to be built by a number of Bodhisattvas, and would-be Bodhisattvas, working together. One of these Bodhisattvas may be more advanced than the others, may have more vision, may be even the first to attain supreme perfect enlightenment and then perhaps help others to take that final step, but all must be inspired by the same ideal - that is to say the ideal of supreme perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all.

I said a little while ago that the Bodhisattva follows the Bodhisattva path for thousands upon thousands of lives, and this applies not only to the Bodhisattva in the singular, but to the Bodhisattvas in the plural - all follow the Bodhisattva path, all follow it for thousands of lives, all follow it together. We have thus a truly wonderful conception. We have the conception of the whole spiritual community, as it were, re-incarnating as a spiritual community, living and working together, helping one another, life after life, until the Buddha Land is established. There's some reflection of this conception in the Pali Jataka Book. Those who were the Buddha's disciples in this his last life, the life in which he attained supreme perfect enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, are represented as having been associated with him in many

previous existences. For example, Ananda, even Devadatta, Yasodhara and so on.

There's a reflection of this same conception on a more ordinary level in a quite remarkable book which was published here in England just a few years ago. It's a book which tells the story of a group of people who were Cathars in Southern France in the 13th Century, and who were 'reincarnated' again to use that expression, during the Napoleonic wars, and again reincarnated in the present century in Cornwall. And in all these different lives, they were, and are, in personal contact with one another. Perhaps there's no need to elaborate - perhaps I've said enough to make the basic point clear - enough to answer the question with which we started. The Buddha Land is built by the Bodhisattvas, and would-be Bodhisattvas - in the plural.

Now thirdly, why does the Bodhisattva build the Buddha Land? That is to say, why do the Bodhisattvas build the Buddha Land? It would be easy to answer this question superficially. It would be easy to answer it along straight-forward and traditional lines. We could say that the Bodhisattva wants to help others by providing them with an ideal environment in which to develop spiritually, and this is quite correct as far as it goes. But it only raises a further question: why is the Bodhisattva concerned with others at all? To answer this question we'll have to go just a little deeper. The question is often raised, the question is often asked in connection with Buddhism and the spiritual life, whether we should devote ourselves to our own salvation, or whether we should devote ourselves to helping others. And in the context specifically of Buddhism, this amounts to asking whether we should follow the Arahant ideal, or whether we should follow the Bodhisattva ideal. And here of course the two ideals are envisaged, in their extreme, even in their mutually exclusive, forms.

The Arahant ideal of course represents the ideal of salvation or emancipation for oneself alone, without bothering much about other people. The Bodhisattva ideal, on the contrary, represents the ideal of helping others, especially helping others to attain salvation without bothering too much about oneself. The truth of the matter is that the two ideals are not really so contradictory as may appear. They cannot really be separated. One cannot really help oneself without helping others. One cannot really help others without helping oneself. Man is a social being. I had almost said essentially a social being, but that might be misunderstood. Man cannot really cut himself off from other people; not for any length of time, though he may of course cut himself off from physical contact with them. He influences them; they influence him. What he does to himself has its effect on them; what he does to them or for them has its effect on him. If he develops emotional positivity, imagination, insight, within himself, it affects them too. If he works for them, gives to them, sacrifices for them, it affects him too.

So one cannot help oneself without helping others. And one cannot help others without helping oneself. Certainly not in the spiritual sphere. The Arahant ideal and the Bodhisattva ideal are inseparable. Carried to its logical conclusion, the Arahant ideal includes the Bodhisattva ideal. Carried to its logical conclusion, the Bodhisattva ideal includes the Arahant ideal. So we can now see why the Bodhisattva concerns himself with others. Why the Bodhisattva builds the Buddha Land. It's because he, because they have no alternative. If you want to evolve spiritually you have to evolve together. Not together in the collective sense of course, you have to evolve individually but together: i.e. in free association with one another. Blake says, "Mutual forgiveness of each vice - such are the gates of Paradise". And similarly we could say, "Mutual helpfulness in leading the spiritual life - such is the foundation of the Buddha Land".

Now fourthly, with what does the Bodhisattva build the Buddha Land? With what do the Bodhisattvas build the Buddha Land? The answer to this question should be quite obvious from what has been said in dealing with the three previous questions. In any case, the Buddha himself has already given the answer in his reply to Ratnakara. The Buddha says "A Buddha Field of Bodhisattvas is a field of living beings." In other-words, a Buddha Land is built with living beings. With living beings who want to evolve. No living beings - no Buddha Land. It's important to remember this. If we want to build a Buddha Land, the Buddha Land, we need people. In a sense, people are all that you need. It doesn't matter what else you don't have. Doesn't matter if you don't have buildings; doesn't matter if you don't have money. If you've got people, you've got everything. If you haven't got people, you haven't got anything. And this principle holds good, we may say, at all levels of the spiritual life - not only in the case of building the Buddha Land.

If you want to have a spiritual community, you need people. if you want to have a spiritual movement, you need people, even if you want to have a talk on building the Buddha Land, you need people. It's not enough just to have the hall. Not enough just to have the speaker - you need people. And when I say people, I mean people who want to become true Individuals, people who want to evolve. At the same

time, we have to be careful to avoid a certain misunderstanding. We speak of building the Buddha Land with people but we shouldn't take this metaphor too literally. It's not that people are really like bricks. It's not that the Bodhisattva is a sort of spiritual bricklayer, slapping them all neatly into place with the aid of a bit of cement, presumably his metta - because people are not passive; people are not inert; people are not things. A Bodhisattva can build the Buddha Land; Bodhisattvas can build the Buddha Land with 'people', inverted commas, only with their co-operation. And co-operation means communication. We'll be dealing with the subject of communication a little later on in the series. I think the week after next when we have a talk on "Being all things to all men". In any case the Buddha Land is not built by a Bodhisattva at all, as we've already seen; it's built by the Bodhisattvas in the plural. But there's no question of even Bodhisattvas building the Buddha Land literally with other people. The Bodhisattvas build the Buddha Land with themselves.

So fifthly and lastly - "How do the Bodhisattvas build the Buddha Land?". Now the answer to this question should be even more obvious than the answer to the last question. The Buddha has already given it in reply to Ratnakara's question. He says that a Bodhisattva's Buddha-field is a field of positive thought, a field of high resolve, a field of virtuous application; a field of the Six Perfections, a field of the Four Immeasurables - that is to say friendliness, compassion, joy and equanimity; a field of the Thirty-seven Aids to Enlightenment; a field for the Ten Precepts. In other words, a Bodhisattva purifies a Buddha-field, to the extent that he purifies his own mind, or he builds a Buddha Land to the extent that he develops himself spiritually, to the extent that he himself practises the Dharma for the benefit of all. This is how he builds the Buddha Land. Here, Bodhisattva is spoken of in the singular, and this is because the Dharma is to be practised by each one individually. But each one practises it however, in spiritual fellowship with others who are also practising it; in other words with other Bodhisattvas. The Buddha Land is built by their united individual practice of the Dharma.

So we've now dealt with our topic. We've dealt with it under five main headings, and we've answered five questions; What is the Buddha Land? Who builds it? Why does he build it? With what does he build it? and How does he build it? We've seen that the Buddha Land is the ideal environment for the leading of the spiritual life, envisaged on a cosmic scale. We've seen that it's built by united spiritual efforts of the Bodhisattvas, that is to say by those who are pledged to the attainment of supreme perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all. We've seen that they build it because, if they want to be Bodhisattvas at all, they've no alternative, because the spiritual development of one involves the spiritual development of all, and vice-versa.

We've seen that the Bodhisattvas build the Buddha Land with themselves; with their own lives. And we've also seen that they build it by means of their individual practice of the Dharma within a context of spiritual fellowship - this is what we've seen; these are the questions we've answered. But in a way, simply answering these questions doesn't help us very much. Because it only leaves us with an even bigger question, and this question surely is: What has all this to do with us? This colourful content of this magical Mahayana Sutra - what has it all to do with us? What have we got to do with building the Buddha Land. After all the Buddha Land is something we can hardly imagine. It's built by beings that we can hardly imagine; built mainly by advanced Bodhisattvas. And it's built by means of a practice of the Dharma that we can hardly imagine, so what has it all got to do with us? So I'll now try to answer this question, which will mean really coming right down to earth. In fact I'll be trying to answer the question not so much directly, as indirectly, with the help of a consideration of art.

Art is often helpful in mediating between the world of higher spiritual values, and ordinary everyday life. Now as one moves about, as one goes around, one hears people saying all sorts of things. Sometimes they complain, but one of the things that one quite often hears people saying, especially I think, within the context of the FWBO, one of the things that one hears people say is "I'm not very creative". Sometimes they say it apologetically. Sometimes they say it defiantly. Sometimes they say it wistfully. Sometimes they say it ironically. But this is what they say in one way or another - "I'm not very creative". They usually mean of course that they can't paint pictures, or write poetry, or compose music. Can't even throw a pot perhaps - not that throwing a pot is all that easy of course, if you haven't done it before. Artistic creativity seems to be rather at a premium nowadays. Everyone is supposed to be creative. But what do we mean when we say we are not very creative? What do we mean by being creative? Is it just a matter of being able to paint pictures etc? In order to answer this question, we'll have to take a look at the nature of creativity, or at least take a look at one aspect of creativity. We can't hope to go into the subject properly in just a few moments. But we'll go into it sufficiently for our present purpose.

Creativity assumes the distinction between subject and object. On the one hand there is the person who

creates. On the other, there is the material out of which he creates; and there's also the 'idea', inverted commas, in accordance with which he creates, and this 'idea' may be more or less conscious. Now the material out of which the artist creates is of three different kinds. First, there's his material environment, or part of his material environment - that is to say for example, a piece of land, a fragment of wood or marble, pigments and canvas. Second, there's his own person, that is to say for example, his voice, his physical body, his own mental and emotional states. Third, there's other people, and this third kind of material, that is to say other people can be divided into two - can be divided into: a) people who are merely passive material for the artist's creativity, and b) people who actively co-operate with the artist's creativity - that is to say people who are themselves creative in relation to the artist's creativity. So here, there's no absolute distinction between the person who creates, and the material out of which he creates, that is to say, other people. They are mutually creators and material of creation. Now I'm not going to give any examples of these three different kinds of material out of which the artist creates, or of the different kinds of works of art which are produced in this way. I'll leave you to work all that out for yourselves.

I want to go back to the distinction between subject and object. We experience ourselves as subjects in relation to the whole external world. The external world is object in the broadest sense. But we're not simply passive in relation to the external world. We do not simply register impressions. The world impinges on us, yes, but we also impinge on the world - we impinge on our own environment, or part of our environment; we impinge on our own selves - on ourselves considered as objects to ourselves i.e. considered reflexively; and we impinge on other people. We not only impinge on the world, we also affect it in various ways. We alter it, we arrange it, we re-arrange it - at least to some extent, however slight. Not only that, we don't impinge on the world at random. We don't alter or arrange, or re-arrange at random. We impinge in accordance with a certain idea, in accordance with a certain pattern or image, or gestalt, or myth, within ourselves, or which is even, ourselves.

This idea etc., is not always consciously realized. In fact, it's very rarely consciously realized. So what does all this mean? It means that our relation with the world is essentially creative. The subject, the human subject is essentially creative in relation to its object. We are creating all of the time. There's no question therefore of anyone not being creative. It's only a question of degree - only a question of greater or less success; greater or less clarity; greater or less positivity; only a question of the quality, as we may call it, of our creativity. We are being creative when we speak; we're being creative when we paint and decorate a room; we're being creative when we write a letter, and this, as some of you must have realized, is the basic principle of what we may call "applied Zen" - that is to say Zen applied to the art of living itself. Creativity is not limited to the exercise of the fine arts.

Now if our relation to the world is essentially creative, an interesting conclusion follows: it follows that the world, our world if you like, is our creation. That we create the world. There's no question therefore of whether or not we should be creative. No question of whether or not we should create a world. We've no choice. It's only a question of what we create. It's only a question of what kind of world we create. In traditional Buddhist terms, we can create for ourselves a world of the gods, that is to say a world of refined, sensuous, intellectual, aesthetic, but a rather selfish, rather self-indulgent pleasure. Or we can create for ourselves a world of men - that is to say a world of ordinary human domestic, civic, political and cultural obligations and activities. Or we can create for ourselves a world of the Asuras, or anti-gods: a world of jealousy, of excessive sexual polarization; of over-aggressiveness; of ruthless competition, and covert or overt conflict. Or we can create for ourselves a world of hungry ghosts - that is to say a world of neurotic craving, intense possessiveness, and relationships characterized by extreme emotional dependence. Or we can create for ourselves a world of tormented beings, that is to say a world of pain and suffering - of intense physical and mental distress. Or we can create for ourselves a world of animals that is to say a world of straight-forward food, sex and sleep.

Or turning our back on all of these we can devote ourselves to developing ourselves as individuals. We can devote ourselves to the Bodhisattva Ideal. We can devote ourselves directly, or indirectly, to building the Buddha Land.