

Lecture 147 : History Versus Myth in Man's Quest for Meaning

Mister Chairman and Friends,

As I look back over the intervening years it seems to me that the year 1957 was a particularly memorable one for me. Or rather perhaps I should say the year beginning with Wesak day 1956 and ending with Wesak day 1957 was a memorable, in fact a particularly memorable, year for me. That was, as at least some of you will remember, a few of you will remember I hope, the year of the two thousand five hundredth Buddhajayanti to use the Indian expression. That was the year; that was the twelve month period, which Buddhist groups, Buddhist organisations, throughout the world in the East and in the West, agreed to celebrate despite their differing individual traditions, agreed to celebrate as the two thousand five hundredth anniversary of the Parinirvana, that is to say the bodily passing away of the Buddha, as well as the two thousand five hundredth anniversary of Buddhism itself. And at that time, 1956, 1957, I was of course in India. To be precise I was up in the hills within sight of Tibet at a place called Kalimpong. It was the year in which some of you may know even if you don't recollect, it was the year that 'The Survey' was published. In that year I also had the good fortune to meet the Dalai Lama a number of times. I also had my first major contact, my first really deep, also my first really extensive contact with the movement of mass conversion to Buddhism amongst the ex-Untouchables of Central and Western India, and that contact took place in Nagpur as some of you may know, following upon the unexpected, in fact the very sudden, death of Doctor B.R.Ambedkar, the leader of a very important section of the ex-Untouchables of that area. And in that same year, in that same twelve month period I also founded, established in Kalimpong the Triyana Vardhana Vihara. So in the course of that one year, that Buddhajayanti year, 1956 to 1957 quite a lot happened for me.

Quite a lot happened for some of you because that was the year, I believe, in which some of you were born! and I was kept, you can imagine, quite busy! And at one point in that year I found myself in New Delhi, in the midst of very fine weather, beautiful sunshine, brilliant blue skies; I'd been invited along with a number of other people by the Government of India, been invited in my capacity, as they were invited in their capacities, as what the Government of India was pleased to style 'A prominent Buddhist from the Border Areas'. I suppose they had some picture in their minds or some government officials had some picture in their minds of these aboriginal Buddhists turning up from the jungles of Assam and West Bengal, as in fact some of them did! There were I recollect altogether 57 of us. We were a very motley bunch in all sorts of shades of red and orange and yellow and there were a few even in white edged with pink, pink piping, whatever that may have signified. There were of course some truly prominent and distinguished Buddhists among the 57, including not least my friend and teacher Dhardo Rimpoche. I need hardly tell you that in the course of our journey we kept each other company very much indeed.

The whole 57 of us, the whole party was in fact given by the Government of India a special train and we were taken around India, Northern India at least, in this special train with everything laid on, from holy place to holy place. Also from Government project to Government project. I forget how many dams and steel mills we saw on that particular occasion! But after a quite busy and exhausting trip around India in this special train seeing all these wonderful places both old and new, ancient and modern, we finished up in New Delhi which of course is the capital of India and there we all took part in our different ways in the semi-official, at least Government sponsored, Buddhajayanti celebrations. And I do recollect that on that occasion a very festive atmosphere prevailed, not only in New Delhi itself but in many parts of the vast Indian Subcontinent. Most of the newspapers brought out special Buddhajayanti numbers. I myself contributed to quite a few of them. Even Communist weeklies brought out very dutifully their Buddhajayanti numbers, because of course the Buddha was the first Communist, the first Socialist etc. etc. And of course as I said a very festive atmosphere prevailed. People had come, people had flocked to New Delhi from all over the Buddhist world, all over the East and from many parts of the West as well. There was even I remember a contingent, believe it or not, of Russian Buddhists in their red robes. Closely guarded by their entourage. It proved quite impossible to establish personal contact with them. I don't remember I must confess very much of the celebrations. All those meetings, speeches, except that in the course of one of them I did inevitably rather put the cat among the pigeons but that's another story!

At this particular moment in time there's one thing that stands out rather clearly in my mind, in my recollection, which I was especially interested in, and that was an exhibition of Asian Buddhist art.

It was probably one of the biggest and one of the very best exhibitions of Buddhist art ever put on anywhere in the world, so I naturally went along; and all the different Asian countries were responsible for organising their respective sections. There was a Japanese section, there was a Cambodian section, Thai section, Bhutanese section, Tibetan section and so on; and next to the Indian section which was really vast, the biggest and perhaps the most important section was the one organised by the People's Republic of China. That was of course still in what we may describe as the palmy days of what was called in India then 'Hindicheeni bhai bhai' which means being interpreted, 'Indians and Chinese are brothers'. That was of course before the 1962 border war. Some of the Chinese Buddhist exhibits were truly magnificent. I certainly had never seen anything like them. Quite a number of them had never been seen outside China and perhaps even in China had been seen by very very few people. And I remember one exhibit, one painting particularly and it was a mural painting or rather I must say it was a full scale copy of a mural painting, an ancient mural painting and it occupied the whole of one wall in the Chinese section of this exhibition. It dated as far as I remember from the Tang dynasty, perhaps from even earlier, and it contained quite a number of figures, and all these figures were life-size and there were two figures in particular which stood out and which attracted my attention. These two figures occupied in fact the centre of the picture, the centre of the mural, the centre of the wall, so to speak.

To the left under a bejewelled canopy sat a beautiful young man. He was seated on a magnificent lotus throne and he was clad in all manner of silks and jewels and he was surrounded by standing yellow robed figures, and from the position of his hands, from the mudra, as it's called, which his hands, which his fingers, adopted, he seems to be saying something, he seemed as it were to be speaking. He seemed to be saying something to the other figure. And this other figure was seated to the right within a sort of curtained pavilion and he was a very old man, He had a long white rather wispy beard, and his face was covered with tiny wrinkles. He was clad in a sort of blue-grey robe, the traditional robe of the Chinese scholar but this was of course, as you'll probably realise in a minute, a slight anachronism, and he was surrounded by standing white robed figures, and from the position of his hands, from the position of his fingers, he seems to be replying to the first figure, replying to the beautiful young man.

Now some of you have probably guessed already who the two figures were. They were Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom on the left, and Vimalakirti, the wise elder of Vaisali on the right. And the painting illustrates the famous meeting between these two. The meeting that is described at the beginning of Chapter five of *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa* entitled 'The consolation of the invalid'.

You will remember from the last talk that all the Arahats and Bodhisattvas present in the Buddha's assembly were reluctant to go and enquire after Vimalakirti's health when the Buddha, knowing that Vimalakirti was sick, asked them to do so. And you may remember the reason why they were reluctant to go. The reason was that each and every one of them had had a painful, perhaps a rather embarrassing, encounter with Vimalakirti on some previous occasion, an encounter which had exposed the limitations of their particular approach to the dharma. And in the end of course (you may remember this too) Manjusri agrees to go. Manjusri is of course fully aware of the difficulties of the undertaking. He's fully aware of Vimalakirti's spiritual greatness. He's fully aware, so to speak, of the danger. He knows what may happen if you come into contact with such a powerful current of spiritual electricity as Vimalakirti. You may get a shock. But in the end he says,

"Although he cannot be withstood by someone of my feeble defences, still, sustained by the grace of the Buddha, I will go to him and will converse with him as well as I can."

Now the word translated as 'grace' in this particular passage is the Sanskrit word 'Adhithana'. It certainly doesn't represent, it certainly doesn't mean grace in the Christian sense. It represents we may say the influence, the non dualistic influence, of the Buddha's transcendental experience of enlightenment. As that influence appears within the framework of the dualistic subject-object relation as though coming from an external source, as though coming from an external source. It isn't really coming from an external source. What Manjusri means by using this language is that he's not going to see Vimalakirti under his own steam, as it were. He's not going to Vimalakirti with any fixed idea. He's going to deal with the situation as it arises. He's going to deal with it spontaneously. At the same time he has no idea, he goes with no idea, of acting spontaneously.

So when Manjusri expresses his willingness to go, to go and see Vimalakirti, to enquire after his health, everybody in the assembly is very excited, except of course the Buddha. He just sits there smiling through it all. But everybody else was quite excited because everybody thought that if these two came together there would be a wonderful discussion, there'd be a real clash perhaps just like between two cymbals, between Manjusri and Vimalakirti, and they thought, they believed, that something really profound was bound to emerge from this encounter, from this clash, of the two, the Bodhisattva and the wise old elder.

So what happened? A quarter of the Bodhisattvas and one sixteenth of the Arahats decided to accompany Manjusri on his visit. I'm sure there's some significance in these figures but we've no time to go into that now, in fact I haven't yet worked it out! And together as well as the Arahats and the Bodhisattvas, many hundreds of thousands of gods and goddesses also decided to go with Manjusri to accompany him on this great visit of his. So Manjusri entered the city of Vaisali with a great retinue as you can imagine. Vimalakirti knew that they were coming, of course. So what did he do? He exercised his magical power. He made everything around him disappear. The house itself, all his attendants, all the furniture, the seats, the couches, everything just disappeared, swallowed up, and all that was left, all that could be seen was just old Vimalakirti lying there on his couch, suspended as it were in mid air, suspended in a great void, and at this point Manjusri enters - though I suppose one can't really say that he enters, there's nothing to enter because the house has been made to disappear, there's no door, there's no floor to walk upon - but no doubt Manjusri got over that little problem. After all he was the Bodhisattva of Wisdom.

On seeing Manjusri Vimalakirti takes as it were the initiative - he calls out, he says,

"You are welcome Manjusri. You are very welcome. There you are without any coming. You appear, without any seeing. You are heard without any hearing."

Manjusri however was quite equal to the occasion. He replies,

"Householder it is as you say. Who comes finally comes not. Who goes, finally goes not. Why? Who comes is not known to come. Who goes is not known to go. Who appears is finally not to be seen."

So he was really quite equal to the occasion and he then goes on quite coolly to ask Vimalakirti about his sickness, because that's why he's come. He tells Vimalakirti that the Buddha has been enquiring after him, and finally he says,

"Householder, whence came this sickness of yours? How long will it continue? How does it stand? How can it be alleviated?"

These are the standard polite Indian enquiries. and Vimalakirti's reply which is not at all standard constitutes one of the most famous passages and also one of the most impressive in the whole of *The Vimalakirti Nirveda* text. So let's see what it is that Vimalakirti says. He says,

"Manjusri, my sickness comes from ignorance and thirst for existence and it will last as long as do the sicknesses of all living beings. Were all living beings to be free from sickness, I also would not be sick. Why? Manjusri, for the Bodhisattva, the world consists only of living beings, and sickness is inherent in living in the world. Were all living beings free of sickness the Bodhisattva also would be free of sickness. For example, Manjusri, when the only son of a merchant is sick, both his parents will suffer as long as that only son does not recover from his sickness. Just so, Manjusri, the Bodhisattva loves all living beings as if each were his only child. He becomes sick when they are sick and is cured when they are cured. You ask me, Manjusri, whence comes my sickness; the sicknesses of the Bodhisattva arise from great compassion."

So this is what Vimalakirti says and these words we may say, these words of Vimalakirti in this place, ring so to speak, all through Mahayana Buddhism.

But Manjusri is not going to let it rest there. That's all very sublime, it's very deep, it's very true, it's very heartfelt, but he's not satisfied, he's not going to let it rest there as it were. So more dialectics between Manjusri and Vimalakirti - very brisk dialectics - follow and in the course of these dialectics, in the course of these exchanges Vimalakirti becomes very paradoxical indeed. We're not going to follow him into those paradoxes but you can take it from me that the paradoxes are very paradoxical indeed!

Eventually in reply to a question by Manjusri Vimalakirti explains how a Bodhisattva should console another Bodhisattva who is sick. He also explains how a sick Bodhisattva should control his mind.

But we're not concerned with all that. That's not our theme tonight. We're concerned with these two figures. We're concerned with the figures of Manjusri and Vimalakirti. Concerned just with the figures themselves. We're concerned with them as I saw them facing each other, confronting each other, in that ancient Chinese mural in 1957. We're concerned with them as representing history versus myth in man's quest for meaning.

Now at this point surely various questions present themselves. In what sense do we speak of man's quest for meaning? What is the meaning of meaning anyway? as some modern scholars, critics, philosophers have asked. What do we mean by history? and that's not altogether self evident. There are quite a number of books I believe entitled 'what is history?' And what do we mean by myth? And in what way do Vimalakirti and Manjusri represent them? Represent history, represent myth. And in what way are they in opposition to each other? So we'll be trying to answer these questions but we're not going to be answering them very systematically, perhaps not very directly even. In any case the answers are to be sought and hopefully found in the painting, in the mural, itself. Found that is to say in visual terms, found in imaginative terms, and what I'm going to say is in a sense a bringing out of the implications, or some of the implications, of that mural painting.

So let's start with the figure of Vimalakirti. First of all of course he's an old man. He has this long white, wispy beard. I believe he's even got long white, wispy eyebrows, and he's got a puckered, wrinkled, but cheerful and humorous, old face. In other words old Vimalakirti is subject to the process of time, as we all are, even though we might not be white haired and wrinkled, with or without the wispy beard, yet. Not only that, not only is Vimalakirti subject to time, he lives at a particular point in time. He lives in the days of the Buddha and according to modern scientific scholarship, that is in the sixth century BCE. He's also subject to space. He lives in a particular part of the world. He lives in Jambudvīpa, in India as we would say. He lives in the great mercantile city of Vaisali. He lives in a particular part of the city, he lives in a particular house, even though at the beginning of chapter five he makes it disappear. He has a particular personal identity. He's known by a particular name, the name of Vimalakirti, which as I think I said, if not in the previous talk, in the one before, means immaculate or stainless glory or fame. He belongs to a particular social group. He follows a particular occupation. He's engaged apparently in some sort of business, and he has, or appears to have, a wife and children. Vimalakirti thus has an historical existence. He's an historical personality. He has an existence which is specific, concrete, contingent and determinate. He has an existence which is determined by time, space and causality. Vimalakirti therefore represents history. Represents the historical reality.

Now when I say that Vimalakirti has an historical existence, that he's an historical personality, I don't necessarily mean that he actually existed. Modern western scholars in fact dispute this. What I mean is that Vimalakirti is depicted in *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa* as an historical personality so that's what he represents.

But what about the figure of Manjusri? It's time we passed on to him. To begin with he's a young man, in fact he's eternally young. That is to say he's not subject to the process of time, not subject to time itself at all. Not only that he doesn't live at any particular point in time, though he can appear at any time. In the same way he's not subject to space. He doesn't live in any particular part of the world. He can appear in any part of the world, appear in any place. The Chinese Buddhists did try to tie him down, as it were, to Mount Wu Tai, one of the five sacred mountains of Buddhist China, but they weren't very successful.

Moreover, while Manjusri has a particular personal identity, it's not a mundane identity. His name is a no-name. He doesn't belong to any particular group. He doesn't follow any particular occupation. He just does whatever is necessary to help living beings develop as occasion arises and he certainly doesn't have a wife and children, not even in appearance. Manjusri thus has no historical existence. He's not an historical personality. He has an existence, in a manner of speaking, which is specific and concrete but which is non contingent and non determinate. He has an existence, again so to speak, which is not determined by time, space and causality. He has what may be called a transcendental existence, or he has what may be called a glorified individuality. And this fact is indicated by the fact that he's not only young but extremely beautiful; that he's clad in all manner of silks and jewels, and that his entire body is surrounded by an aura of brilliant golden light. Manjusri therefore represents the suprahistorical reality; he represents archetypal reality, spiritual reality; he represents myth.

Now we're using the word myth rather loosely here. Not using it in its literal sense. In fact it hasn't got a literal sense. The realm of myth is not a realm of clearly defined meanings. That's the whole point about it. The realm of myth is a realm of undefined meanings, indeed it's a realm of indefinable meanings. Nowadays a whole industry has been set up apparently to explain the meaning of all sorts of ancient myths. But these 'meanings' - inverted commas - of ancient myths cannot really be explained in this sort of way. They can't in fact be understood in the conceptual sense at all. The meaning so to speak of myth, of myths, has to be felt, has to be experienced, has to be enacted, has to be lived. There are various other things that belong to this realm of undefined meanings. Things such as symbols, archetypal images, the imagination itself, poetry, as well as myth. In fact I'm using the word myth to cover, to suggest, to indicate, to hint at, all these things. The word myth in fact stands for, represents, the whole realm of undefined meanings, and this realm I've indicated by one particular form, one particular expression of undefined meaning, that is to say myth.

So here we are with these two figures. The figure of Vimalakirti and the figure of Manjusri. The one representing history, the other representing myth. We have them confronting each other, as in the mural. We have history versus myth in man's quest for meaning.

But just where does Manjusri come from? Where does myth come from? It's easy to understand where Vimalakirti comes from. Vimalakirti has historical existence. His is an historical personality, or at least it's represented as such. So the question of where he comes from just doesn't arise. It's the same with the Sakyamuni, the same with Gautama the Buddha, There's no question of where He comes from. He's just there so to speak on the stage of history. But Manjusri, the figure of Manjusri, requires some explanation. He's not found in the Pali scriptures, so where does he come from? How did he get into Buddhism? How did he get into the Mahayana? How did he get into the pages of *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*? How did he get into the Buddha's assembly? This is quite a question.

But before going into it I want to stay just a little longer with the actual meeting of Manjusri and Vimalakirti. I've called it a 'confrontation', but it was more than that as you'll see for yourself if you just read this particular chapter of the text. It was a vigorous and a rigorous dialectical exchange in which neither spared the other. They really did set to. In a sense each was out to win, each was out to defeat the other, but not in an egoistic sort of way. Each was testing the other, just like you test an earthenware pot to see whether it's cracked or not. Each was experiencing the other in the confrontation, in the rigorous, vigorous dialectical exchange, in the testing, and at the same time each was experiencing himself, experiencing himself in contact with the other. Each was experiencing the truth, the reality of that situation.

So the contest between them takes place within a context that is completely positive. I'm reminded of Blake's saying, "Opposition is true friendship". There's a lot that could be said on this topic but again we've no time now. The topic in fact deserves a whole lecture to itself.

The main point of course being that friendship - this very much undervalued word - friendship, especially spiritual friendship, is not something weak, sentimental, indulgent, pusillanimous. It's something, vigorous, challenging, demanding, bracing, invigorating, stimulating, inspiring. It's a cold shower, rather than a warm bath!

In the last talk we saw Vimalakirti giving proof of this kind of friendship, of this kind of goodwill. In his encounters that is to say with the various Arahats and Bodhisattvas. They of course were not quite able to stand up to his rather vigorous friendship. it was rather too much for them. But Manjusri is able to stand it. The two are in fact more or less evenly balanced, evenly matched, so they can be friends.

I've mentioned Blake's saying but I'm also reminded of what Nietzsche says in more than one place about one's enemies being really one's friends. The greater the enemy, the better the friend, in fact. And towards the end of Chapter six of *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa* on the Inconceivable Liberation or Emancipation, Vimalakirti himself says in fact much the same thing, though he says it in his own way.

Mahakasyapa, one of the Arahats has just said, has just exclaimed in fact,

"What could the entire host of maras,"(that is to say evil ones) "ever do to one who is devoted to this Inconceivable Liberation." But what does Vimalakirti say? He goes even further. So let's see what he does say. He says,

"Reverend Mahakasyapa," (They're very polite to one another in these Buddhist sutras) "Reverend Mahakasyapa, The maras who play the devil in the innumerable universes of the ten directions are all Bodhisattvas dwelling in the Inconceivable Liberation, who are playing the devil in order to develop living beings through their skill in Liberative Technique. Reverend Mahakasyapa, all the miserable beggars who come to the Bodhisattvas of the innumerable universes of the ten directions to ask for a hand, a foot, an ear, a nose, some blood," (They do all these things in the Jataka stories you may remember) "blood, muscles, bones, marrow, an eye, a torso, a head, a limb, a member, a throne, a kingdom, a country, a wife, a son, a daughter, a slave, a slave girl, a horse, an elephant, a chariot, a cart, gold, silver, jewels, pearls, conches, crystal, coral, beryl, treasures, food, drink, elixirs and clothes. - These demanding beggars are usually Bodhisattvas living in the Inconceivable Liberation, who through their skill in Liberative Technique wish to test and thus demonstrate the firmness of the higher resolve of the Bodhisattvas. Why? Reverend Mahakasyapa. the Bodhisattvas demonstrate that firmness by means of terrible austerities. Ordinary persons have no power to be thus demanding of Bodhisattvas, unless they are granted the opportunity. They are not capable of killing and depriving in that manner without being freely given the chance. Reverend Mahakasyapa, just as a glowworm cannot eclipse the light of the sun, so Reverend Mahakasyapa, it is not possible without special allowance, that an ordinary person can thus attack and deprive a Bodhisattva. Reverend Mahakasyapa, just as a donkey could not muster an attack on a wild elephant, even so Reverend Mahakasyapa, one who is not himself a Bodhisattva cannot harass a Bodhisattva. Only one who is himself a Bodhisattva can harass another Bodhisattva, and only a Bodhisattva can tolerate the harassment of another Bodhisattva. Reverend Mahakasyapa, such is the introduction to the power of the knowledge of Liberative Technique of the Bodhisattvas who live in the Inconceivable Liberation."

Well. You may remember that in the course of the last talk we saw that Indra, the king of the gods, approached the Bodhisattva Jagatimdhara, and what did he do - do you remember? he offered him twelve thousand heavenly maidens, and Jagatimdhara refused the maidens. Then Vimalakirti came along and he said that it was not Indra. He said that it was Mara, the evil one. But in the light of the passage just quoted we can go even further than that. Indra was Mara - yes, but who was Mara? I'll leave you to work it out for yourselves! It's time we got back to the question of where Manjusri comes from. I've already mentioned that he's not found in the Pali scriptures. The Pali scriptures are of course the scriptures of the Theravada or school of elders, the form of Buddhism which is one of the early Buddhist schools, in fact one of the earliest. The Pali scriptures were not written down until several hundred years after the Buddha's Parinirvana. But nonetheless the oldest parts of the Pali scriptures undoubtedly reflect the actual conditions under which the Buddha, Gautama the Buddha, lived and taught. They reflect, at least to some extent, the actual form that his teaching assumed.

The Buddha of course lived and taught in 6th Century BCE India, especially in North Eastern India. So we find that the Pali scriptures give us in fact a great deal of information about life and conditions in India at that time. Information about the political situation, information about social life, economic life, information about manners and customs, about religious beliefs and superstitions. Even information about things like sports and games. The Pali scriptures in fact are our main source of information about Northern India during this whole period. And the result is that in the Pali scriptures we find the Dharma, we find Buddhism, deeply embedded in its historical context. We find it even overlaid to some extent by that context. In the Pali scriptures we find a Buddhism which is an historical phenomenon. A Buddhism which is determined by time, space and causality. A Buddhism which exists in terms of historical reality. A Buddhism which expresses itself in terms of historical reality, so to speak. But which the historical reality also obscures and conceals. Clearly there's a parallel between the Buddhism of the Pali scriptures and the figure of Vimalakirti. A parallel in respect of their form, that is. Both belong to the realm of historical reality. They do not belong to the realm of myth, they do not belong to the realm of archetypal reality. Not that elements of myth, some elements of myth, are not found in the Pali scriptures but they're found in a rudimentary, though still very beautiful form, mainly in the form of parables and extended similes. Similarly, in Mahayana sutras like *The Vimalakirti Nirveda*, there are elements of historical reality, but these occupy a distinctly subordinate place, distinctly subordinate position. In *The Vimalakirti Nirveda* itself for instance, we find ourselves in Amrapali's garden and in the city of Vaisali, but into this realm of homely historical reality there erupts the realm of archetypal reality, of spiritual reality. Or rather the realm of homely historical reality is made to open up in all directions into the realm of archetypal reality, as when Vimalakirti or the Buddha performs a miracle, so to speak, puts on a display of magical power.

We also meet in *The Vimalakirti Nirveda* personalities who are not familiar to us, not familiar to us from the Pali scriptures at all. We meet the Bodhisattvas. In particular of course we meet Manjusri himself.

The Buddha is rather a special case. The Buddha of the Mahayana sutras, the Buddha of *The Vimalakirti Nirveda*, that is. He's a very familiar figure of course, after all we've met him repeatedly in the Pali scriptures, but at the same time as we encounter him in the Mahayana sutras and in *The Vimalakirti Nirveda*, at the same time he's an unfamiliar figure. In a way he seems less like The Buddha, but in a way he seems more like The Buddha than ever. However I'm going on ahead a little too quickly.

I've said that in the Pali scriptures we find a Buddhism which expresses itself in terms of historical reality, so to speak, but which the historical reality also obscures and conceals. Some early Buddhists were not satisfied with this sort of situation. They wanted to take Buddhism as it were, out of its historical context. They wanted to emancipate it, so to speak, from the limitations of a merely historical, even a merely earthly existence. The notion of history in the modern sense was probably quite unknown to them, but they were interested in the Dharma. They were interested in what the Buddha had said. They were committed, spiritually committed, to what the Buddha had said. They were not interested in the conditions under which he had said it, that is to say the historical conditions. They were interested in the Dharma as a living spiritual truth, a living spiritual reality. They were not interested, as we only too often nowadays are interested in the West at least, in Buddhism as an historical phenomenon. For them the Dharma really was Sanatana - eternal.

Consequently they started forgetting the actual conditions under which the Buddha lived and taught. They didn't seem to think those very important. They started forgetting the historical details, and they concentrated more and more on the Buddha as a purely spiritual personality, concentrated more and more on the Dharma as a purely spiritual truth, a purely spiritual reality. They concentrated on bringing out the deeper implications of the Dharma. Not only that. Not only did they emancipate the Dharma from the limitations of a merely historical existence, they also universalised it. They formulated it or reformulated it in such a way as to make it applicable, not just to the people of India, Northern India and North Eastern India, in the 6th Century BCE, but to all living beings whatsoever throughout time and throughout space.

The Dharma had of course been that before in principle. The Buddha after all taught Bahujana

hitaya, Bahujana sukkhaya - for the happiness and benefit of all men, all living beings.' But the fact had not been fully brought out. They, those early Buddhists, also did something else. They adorned the Dharma.

I always remember in this connection something that a friend of mine, a very good friend of mine said many many years ago in Bombay. He said, and it stuck in my mind ever since, "That which we love, we adorn." In other words that which we love we decorate, we embellish, we beautify. So those early Buddhists who took the Dharma out of its historical context, who universalised it, must have loved it very much because they certainly adorned it, they certainly decorated it magnificently. They set it in an ideal context, they set it in an archetypal context. They set it in an ideal realm, an archetypal realm. They set it in a realm flashing with light and glowing with colour, in fact with all the colours of the rainbow. They set it in a realm where everything was made of jewels. Where there was nothing but music and perfume in the air. In a word they transferred it, transferred the Dharma, from the realm of historical reality to the realm of spiritual reality. From the realm of history to the realm of what I've called myth. And we can see this sort of process most clearly perhaps in the case of The Buddha himself.

Before saying anything about this however perhaps I should make just one thing clear. It was this dehistoricising, universalising, idealising tendency on the part of some early Buddhists that was one aspect of the development of Mahayana, of the Mahayana form of Buddhism as it afterwards came to be known. Of the tendency which eventually found expression in the Mahayana scriptures.

In the Pali scriptures the Buddha appears as a wandering religious mendicant. He's shaven headed, probably just with a two finger stubble, clad in ochre coloured rags - we mustn't say robes - rags, with a begging bowl either of wood or metal in his hand, and from a distance he's indistinguishable from thousands of other wandering ascetics such as you can see even today in India. The Pali scriptures themselves describe occasions on which the Buddha was not recognised by other people, even by Bhikkhus at close quarters, but it's impossible not to recognise the Buddha of the Mahayana. It's impossible not to recognise the Buddha as he appears in the Mahayana scriptures, because he's seated on a lofty, elaborate, bejewelled throne. There's a canopy of jewels suspended, glittering, above his head, and the begging bowl in his lap is seemingly carved from solid block of lapis-lazuli or emerald, and a brilliant golden light radiates from all parts of his body, particularly his head, and he teaches the Dharma. He teaches it not just for a few hours or for a few years or for the span, the short span, of a single earthly human life. He sometimes teaches it for ages upon ages without stopping, without pause, and he teaches it in a purely spiritual realm, an archetypal realm. He teaches it to hundreds of thousands, even millions, of living beings. And some of them, some of these beings, are figures familiar to us from the Pali scriptures, Arahats - Ananda, Indra, but some of them are not familiar to us at all, that is to say for example the Bodhisattvas, and among the Bodhisattvas of course is Manjusri.

So we can see now where Manjusri comes from, He comes from the very realm which he represents. He comes from the realm of myth. He comes from the realm of spiritual reality, archetypal reality.

But a further question arises and with this question we go a little deeper. We start approaching the topic of man's quest for meaning. Why does Manjusri come from the realm of spiritual reality, the realm of archetypal reality? Or - what amounts to the same thing - why did those early Buddhists transfer the Dharma from the realm of historical reality to the realm of spiritual reality? I can begin to answer this question perhaps by referring to our own experience. Suppose we read the Pali scriptures and then read the Mahayana scriptures. Not all of them of course but enough of them, enough of the Pali scriptures, just say two or three volumes, enough of the Mahayana scriptures, another two or three volumes, to give us just an experience, just a taste of them. We'll notice that there's a big difference between them. We'll notice that we get something from the Mahayana scriptures that we do not get from the Pali scriptures. Now I'm not running down the Pali scriptures. The Pali scriptures are of unique historical importance. They give us a vivid and deeply moving picture of the life and teaching career of the human historical Buddha. They contain the basic spiritual principles from which all subsequent forms of Buddhism developed. They contain all the basic spiritual practices. They are rich in content and full of inspiration and they cannot possibly be dispensed with. As Buddhists we're enormously indebted to them. Humanity in fact

is indebted to them. They cannot be praised enough and we cannot be sufficiently grateful to them, to these Pali scriptures. But they are not all sufficing. They don't contain everything that everybody needs. There is some element lacking, some element missing, and we find that missing element in the Mahayana scriptures, and our experience of the Mahayana scriptures is therefore totally different.

When we read the Mahayana scriptures we are emancipated from the contingent and the determinant. We're emancipated from time, space and causality. We're emancipated from historical reality and we experience archetypal reality, we experience spiritual reality, we experience myth, we experience the realm of undefined meanings. We encounter the Buddha of the Mahayana. In technical terms we encounter the Sambhogakaya. We encounter the Bodhisattvas. We encounter Manjusri.

Now why is this experience, why is this sort of experience so important to us? Why is this kind, this type of encounter so important to us? It's important because it puts us in touch with something within ourselves with which we were not previously in touch. It sparks off something that was not previously sparked off, something that the Pali scriptures even were unable to spark off. In other words the realm of archetypal reality corresponds to something in us. Myth corresponds to something in us. The realm of undefined meanings corresponds to something in us. The Bodhisattvas correspond to something in us. Manjusri corresponds to something in us. So that we come close here to the message of The Tibetan Book of the Dead, when in the intermediate state the deceased person is experiencing all sorts of visions, visions of Buddhas, visions of Bodhisattvas, in both their peaceful and their wrathful forms. Then what is it that the lama says addressing the consciousness, so to speak, of the deceased person? The lama says, "Do not be afraid. Recognise them" (recognise all these visions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the wrathful and the peaceful) "as your own thought forms, as phenomena of your own true mind." In that way liberation is attained. In that way emancipation is attained.

We also come close here to man's quest for meaning. But first I want to relate a small experience of my own, an experience that illustrates the sort of thing I'm talking about.

It happened when I was writing something, it might have been 'The Survey', at any rate it was a long time ago. Every now and then in the course of the writing I'd come to a simile that is to say I wrote a simile or I had to write a simile or felt like writing a simile or there came a bit of description. In other words there came something poetic, just for a few lines, maybe for a whole paragraph, and I noticed at that time that the feeling with which I then wrote, wrote the simile or the description, the feeling with which I wrote, was quite different from the feeling with which I wrote the prose parts you may say. I felt more creative, more inspired. In other words there was a difference between the experience of prose, writing prose, and the experience of something of a more 'poetic' - inverted commas - nature. And I really noticed it when making the transition from one to the other. Even though it was only for a few lines or just a short paragraph. So I noticed this sort of thing even though it was on a very small scale in a very small way. So how much more do we notice this sort of thing when we make the transition from the prose of the Pali scriptures to the poetry of the Mahayana scriptures. In other words the transition from history to myth on a grand scale. We notice it in fact when we make the transition from poetry to prose on any level to any extent. Some people of course unfortunately cannot make this transition. There's the well known case some of you may recollect, of Charles Darwin. When Charles Darwin was a young man he really loved poetry and especially he loved Shakespeare and he read lots and lots of poetry, lots and lots of Shakespeare, but then after that, for the greater part of his life he was immersed in scientific research. But as an old man he tried to get back to poetry, get back to Shakespeare, but to his dismay he found it just didn't mean anything to him any more. He'd lost his capacity to enjoy poetry, he'd lost the faculty to enjoy it. One whole side of himself in the course of those years upon years, decades upon decades even, of scientific research had atrophied and died.

And much the same sort of thing happened with John Stuart Mill, at least for part of his life. What with logic and political economy which were his favourite subjects even when a small boy, he found he got more and more cut off from poetry, more and more alienated from poetry, not just in the narrow literary sense, but cut off, alienated, from the poetry of life, as we may call it.

Nowadays we are all exposed to this sort of danger. We all suffer from this sort of deprivation, at least to some extent. We've been suffering from it particularly since the Industrial Revolution. It's significant, it's highly significant, that at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution Blake, William Blake, warned against it. He warned against the loss of what he called 'the divine vision', and that's why he criticised Bacon and Newton and Locke so vigorously. He criticised them because they tended to limit man to the realm of historical reality, to the realm of time, space and causality. In his own literary and visual creative work Blake of course was not so limited, not so confined; and in the prophetic books especially he's concerned with - in fact he explores - the deeper levels of human experience. He's concerned with archetypal forces and archetypal forms, and that's why he possesses such a great fascination for so many people today. Many people in fact today are trying to break out of the prison of merely historical reality. Trying to establish contact with something of the nature of an archetypal realm. And this explains perhaps the popularity of books like 'The Lord of the Rings'. It explains perhaps even the popularity of some forms of science fiction. It's no coincidence I think that I once described the Mahayana sutras as 'Transcendental science-fiction'. However, I am digressing.

It's time that we returned, it's time that we got to grips with man's quest for meaning. Meaning is not an abstract thing. It's not something that you can look up in the dictionary. Meaning must be meaning for you, must be something that you personally experience. Man's quest for meaning is therefore his quest for himself. His quest for the totality, for the wholeness, of his own being. On one level, so to speak, man belongs to the realm of historical reality. On another level he belongs to the realm of spiritual reality, and the Mahayana scriptures reveal this realm to him. Myth reveals this world to him. Poetry reveals this world to him. And they don't reveal it to him as something external to himself. They reveal it to him as his own world. Reveal it to him as a world in which he himself actually lives, usually without knowing it, a world of which he is part. A world of which he is an inhabitant. It was a maxim of the Neo-Platonists that the eye was able to see the sun only because it had in it something sun-like, something akin to the sun. Similarly we can experience the archetypal realm at all only because we ourselves are on another level archetypal beings.

If we read a Mahayana sutra properly we become part of the sutra, we become part of the assembly. We're included in the assembly. There we are right in the midst of the assembly. But the fact that we can ourselves make the transition from the realm of historical reality to the realm of archetypal reality does not mean that the realm of historical reality is left behind. It doesn't mean that we discard history and opt for myth. We need both. We need both because we exist in fact in both realms. We exist in the realm of historical reality, we exist in the realm of archetypal reality. We exist in them all the time. Even though in the case of the realm of archetypal reality we may not be conscious of the fact. There's no question therefore of our literally passing from the one to the other. There's no question even of them existing as it were side by side.

In the mural painting Vimalakirti and Manjusri confront each other. They're engaged in vigorous encounter. It's a question of history versus myth, but what we have to do is to bring them together. That there has to be a sort of marriage between Vimalakirti and Manjusri. We have to realise that Vimalakirti is Manjusri, and that Manjusri is Vimalakirti. Time is eternity. Eternity is time. Rupa is Sunyata. Sunyata is Rupa. If we can realise that then history and myth will have played their part in man's quest for meaning, and man's quest for meaning, his quest for himself, will be complete.