Lecture 160: The Ex-Untouchable Indian Buddhists
(Lecture delivered to the Wrekin Trust)

Sir George and friends,

A year ago I was in India. I was in India on a sort of lecture tour among the ex-untouchable Buddhists of Maharastra and in the course of that tour which lasted very nearly three months I visited about two dozen towns and villages, mostly in the state of Maharastra and mostly in an area called Marak Wada and in the course of that tour I delivered some forty-five lectures. And in the course of that tour I delivered some forty-five lectures, and I was thinking only yesterday that the conditions under which I gave those lectures, the conditions under which we all met in those various towns and villages, were very different from the conditions under which we've been meeting and are still meeting this weekend.

Of course, to begin with the weather was very different - no rain, no drizzle, no cold, no damp, no chill! There was nothing but blazing hot sunshine, very, very blue skies and very, very dry air. There was lots of dust, there was lots of sand and I very, very quickly got a sore throat.

And of course the people were very different. To begin with there were lots more of them. India's a very big country, it's a sub-continent, but it seems absolutely full of people. Wherever you go in India, especially in a great city like Bombay where I also spent a few days, you're literally tripping over people all the time. There are 200,000 people every night sleeping on the sidewalks, they live on the sidewalks, they live under little scraps of sacking stretched out over the pavement and under the scrap of sacking one finds all their worldly goods and there's a family living there quite happily, mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, seven or eight children, babies, dogs, all living there on the sidewalk under this little scrap of sacking. How they live one can only speculate, but there they are.

So there are people, lots of people, and at all the meetings I attended, all the meetings I addressed, there weren't just a few hundred people as we have here this weekend, there were thousands of them, there were tens of thousands of them, sometimes crammed together in very, very small areas indeed, and of course all sitting on the floor, sitting on the ground, and with all sorts of brilliant lights everywhere. Indians are very fond of doing things in a very colourful sort of fashion - there were lots of fairly lights, coloured fairy lights all over the place, and there were lights made out of revolving wheels, Dharmachakras, to symbolize the Buddha's turning of the Wheel of the Dharma, and of course when you arrive at one of these meetings and when you are going to give a lecture, you are greeted in a very special fashion.

First of all, up on the stage there's a sort of throne where you have to sit because very often one speaks sitting down, sitting cross-legged, and before your speech, before your lecture, they insist upon garlanding you. They garland you, different groups, different people, they come forward and they put a garland of flowers around your neck. In most of these places since I hadn't been for quite a few years and they were very glad to see me, I sometimes got twenty-five, or thirty-five or forty-five garlands, you know there were people coming up every few seconds to give you a garland, they put it over your neck, you take it off and you hand it to an attendant and then the next one, and this takes sometimes half an hour or forty-five minutes and you have to sit there, smiling, through it all.

And after that when you've been properly introduced and maybe served with light refreshments on the platform itself, well, you stand up and you give your talk. And of course in India they are great lovers of lectures. Many people don't forget are illiterate, so sometimes they say to you before you begin that you should on no account speak for less than two hours. If you speak for less than two hours they're a bit disappointed. In England it's very different! They ask you not to exceed - well I'm afraid this morning it's, I won't say a miserable hour and a quarter, because an hour and a quarter's really quite a lot of time - but this morning at least for me here it's an hour and a quarter.

So conditions, there, circumstances, are very different. And of course my audiences were made up, not of English people, not of comparatively well-to-do people, not of highly educated people, not of people who have been to university, but of these ex-untouchable Buddhists, most of whom are very, very poor and who occupy the very bottom of the social ladder in India. And it's about them that I want to say something this morning.

As you know, I'm speaking this morning at least at quite short notice. And I'm supposedly taking the place of Miss Monica Furlong. Of course I don't presume literally to take the place of Miss Monica Furlong, I'm sure that she would have said, I'm sure that she would have told you something which I'm not able to say, something which I'm not able to tell you. I'm sure she would have made her own very distinctive contribution to this conference, which nobody else could make. Nonetheless, if I'm not taking her place, I'm at least taking up her time, and I'm going to speak about these ex-untouchable Buddhists, because if one ever has to speak on any occasion at very short notice, without much in the way of preparation, there are only two sorts of topics about which one can speak. One can either speak about those things on which one has a lot of information, or one can speak about those things with regard to which one has strong feelings, strong emotions, even powerful emotions, and I think I can say that having been associated with them now for upwards of thirty years on and off I do have very strong feelings for these ex-untouchable Buddhists in India, in fact for the ex-untouchables generally, whether they are Buddhists, or whether they are still followers of any other faith. When it was first suggested to me that I should fill in for Miss Furlong this morning of course the first thing that occurred to me was, what on earth am I going to talk about. She was going to talk about angels, like Jacob, wrestling with the angel - I didn't feel quite equal to that, not on a Sunday morning. But then it occurred to me that yes, I should speak about something which I had very strong feelings for, and the next thought which occurred to me was that perhaps among my strongest feelings are the feelings that I have for these ex-untouchables. So that in a way made me realize something about myself.

So I'm going to speak about them. And this I think will have the advantage anyway of helping to bring us right down to earth, back to something as it were very, very practical, even something earthy and I understand that this in any case was what Miss Furlong was going to do in her own way. She was going to have something to say about the redemption of the body. I'm not quite sure how she would have approached the topic because as a Buddhist I tend to think that the body is not in need of redemption. It's the mind that is in need of redemption. It's the mind, it's in the mind, that everything tends to go wrong. The body is quite innocent! We tend to blame the body very often, but it's not the body that is to blame at all, it's the mind, it's the consciousness.

But anyway, let me not linger on on that topic, let me come on to the subject of these ex-untouchables, these ex-untouchable Buddhists. Well, first of all, who are these ex-untouchables? What do we mean by un-touchable? And how did they become Buddhists? And also perhaps - this might be of some interest - how did I come to be involved with them? I'm afraid it's all quite a long story, and I'm going to be hard put to it to get it all into the sixty minutes that now remain to me, so I'd better start at once, I'd better go

right back to the beginning.

I'd better go back to the Buddha himself, back to the Buddha's own teaching, because that is really where it all begins. The Buddha as I'm sure you all know gained enlightenment, became Buddha, under the Bodhi Tree at Bodha Gaya two thousand and five hundred years ago. And after initial hesitation he decided to communicate his great vision, to communicate the content of his enlightenment experience to the rest of humanity, so he started teaching, he started wandering. He wandered from place to place. He met people, he talked with them, he communicated with them and he tried to impart to them that great vision, his vision of human enlightenment, his vision of the potentiality of each and every individual human being. He tried to get them to plant their feet too on the path that led to enlightenment. So in this way he spent five and forty years. He didn't write any book, like Socrates he just talked with the people that he met. The books were written later, his teachings, after several hundred years of oral transmission, were written down and became what were eventually regarded as the Buddhist scriptures, the Buddhist canonical texts. I'm not going to try to give you a resume of the Buddha's teaching at this point - that would be too much. And in any case I imagine the majority of you are in any case familiar with the general outlines of his teaching.

But after the Buddha's death, what after Buddhists call the parinirvana of the Buddha, these teachings spread more and more widely in India itself, spread from the north down to the south, and a number of different spiritual and doctrinal and organisational developments took place. If we look carefully at the whole period of the development of Buddhism in India, we can see that it can be roughly divided into three great periods, better to say three great periods succeeding say the first hundred year period covered by the life of the Buddha himself and his immediate disciples. We can call that period the period of archaic Buddhism. As I say it lasted about a hundred years.

After that we have a period of about fifteen hundred years which falls quite naturally into three great periods, each of about five hundred years, and in the course of each of those five hundred year periods we find that one particular form, one particular development of Buddhism was dominant. The first five-hundred year period was the period of what is generally called Hinayana Buddhism, the Buddhism of the Little Way, or the Little Path, or the Little Vehicle. This represents a sort of systematisation, a sort of what shall I say, a sort of consolidation of the Buddha's teaching, along certain lines, for instance, the spiritual ideal of that period, the spiritual ideal of the Hinayana was what is known as the Arahant. The Hinayana had the Arahant ideal. The arahant was one who had gained nirvana, one who had gained enlightenment, but he had gained it so to speak for himself alone, he wasn't so concerned with other people, he wasn't so concerned with what was happening to other people, he wasn't so much concerned with helping other people. And that did represent to some extent a sort of narrowing down of the original ideal of the Buddha himself.

On the more philosophical side, Hinayana Buddhism was responsible for the development of what is called the Abhidharma. Dharma is the general word for the Buddha's teaching, it also means truth or reality, but generally, more generally just teaching or doctrine. Abhi means higher or superior or further, so the Abhidharma was a sort of systematisation of the Buddha's teaching and it tended sometimes to be of a rather as it were analytical nature. For instance, the Buddha was very much concerned with the extirpation of what we would generally call egotism or selfishness and to this end he had taught his doctrine of what is called the five skandhas, that is to say he had analysed the individual being into rupa or form, I'm giving very approximate translations, vedana, feeling, samjna, perception, samkara or acts of volition, and vijnana or acts of consciousness.

Now the Abhidharma developed this. It developed this very, very much further, and it analysed all these elements into their constituent elements until it had a sort of short list of ultimate elements. I expect you recognise the sort of pattern. Different schools had different lists. But some of them had very long lists indeed, some of them had lists which included several hundred, or if you sub-divided it even further several thousand items and these different items, these ultimate elements into which the whole of existence, mental as well as physical, had been analysed, tended to be regarded as ultimate and these also were known by the name of dharmas. This is rather confusing as in Buddhism you've got this word dharma used in all sorts of different ways. Dharma means the teaching, dharma means something like cause or condition, dharma also means one of these ultimate elements, as well as meaning idea in a very general sense, in the sense of mental object, so the Abhidharma tended to reduce the whole phenomena of existence, all the phenomena of existence, to a finite number of discreet ultimate entities. And this development reached its apogee in a school called the Sarvastivada. I won't go into their refinements upon this teaching, we'll see its significance of it in a minute when we come on to the Mahayana and the Madhyamika. But anyway this was the sort of development which took place within the Hinayana during that first five hundred year period with regard to the Abhidharma.

And then on the more practical side - of course I'm covering quite a lot of ground quite rapidly so I'm generalising rather wildly in a way that I wouldn't perhaps care to do in front of a gathering of Buddhist scholars, because scholars are always apt to question one's little generalisations, one can only get away with that sort of thing in front of a non-specialist audience. But there was, in the case of the Hinayana, rather an emphasis on the practical side, on the monastic life, and on asceticism. I won't say anything more than that.

But then, after the first five hundred year period during which the Hinayana was dominant came the second five hundred year period, during which the Mahayana was dominant. Now Mahayana means Great Way, or Great Vehicle, I can't stop to explain why it is so called, but broadly speaking the spiritual ideal of the Mahayana is that of the Bodhisattva, the Bodhi Being. Now we saw that the Arahant ideal consisted in the striving for enlightenment for one's own sake only, not paying very much attention to the plight or the fate of other people. In the case of the bodhisattva ideal it is quite different. The bodhisattva ideal we may say is the ideal of spiritual altruism, even of transcendental altruism carried to unprecedented heights. The bodhisattva is one who is not concerned with his individual salvation or his individual enlightenment, that is to say separate from the salvation or separate from the enlightenment of other beings. There's a sort of more popular, more exoteric form of this teaching which maintains that the bodhisattva actually gives up actually sacrifices his individual enlightenment so that he can, instead of disappearing into nirvana, remain in the world, remain in the samsara, and continue to help other living beings. That is rather exoteric, that is a rather sort of exoteric presentation of the bodhisattva ideal. What in fact the bodhisattva does, what in fact the bodhisattva realises, is that the salvation or the enlightenment of one is inseparable from the salvation or the enlightenment of all. The Mahayana has a sort of ideal of what one might only describe, using very un-Buddhistic terminology, as sort of cosmic emancipation, or cosmic salvation, and the bodhisattva sees that he has to devote himself to this, that it is not actually possible for anybody to be totally enlightened all by themselves. You can't sort of shut yourself up in a separate nirvanic compartment, while others do not have any experience of nirvana. You just can't do that, the nature of existence is such, existence, every part of existence is so wonderfully inter-related that there is no such thing as individual enlightenment. This, the bodhisattva sees, this the bodhisattva realises. So he devotes himself to the great cause of what may be called universal enlightenment, universal salvation, and he's prepared to endure, to suffer life

after life, birth after birth, death after death, in every life, in every birth, pursuing this path of devoting himself to the cause of universal enlightenment, trying to carry the whole of the human race forward, at least a few steps on the path that will lead eventually to the enlightenment of all. So this is the great Bodhisattva Ideal, this is the spiritual ideal of the Mahayana which I've just sketched in in very rough outline.

And then on the philosophical side we have in the case of the Mahayana the great teaching of sunya, we have the Sunyavada. Sunya is a very wonderful word, it means empty, and it means full, it means zero in Indian mathematics, the sunya is the zero, sunya is their word for zero. Now we saw that the Hinayana, we saw that the Hinayana Abhidharma, especially in the form of the Sarvastivada school, tended to reduce the whole of existence to a limited number of ultimate psycho-physical elements. The Mahayana seized upon this point, especially did the Madhyamika school in the person of Nagarjuna, seize upon this point, and it subjected the views of the Sarvastivadins, what are called the pan-realistic views of the Sarvastivadins to a rather devastating criticism. And to cut a long story short, the Madhyamika school showed that you couldn't have a finite list of ultimate elements, it showed that no element whether physical or mental or anything else, could be regarded as ultimate, as final. You could go on sub-dividing and sub-dividing and sub-dividing, but when you'd sub-divided as it were to infinity, when you'd sub-divided all possible sub-divisions, when perhaps you'd realised that they were nothing but mental constructions in the long run, then what did you have? What was left? And the answer was that what you had left was the sunyata, the void, the emptiness. So in this way the Mahayana, and especially the Madhyamika reduced the dharmas as they were called to sunyata. This is what is called technically the Dharmanaratmya or the selflessness of all dharmas, selflessness in the sense of not being ultimate, of all dharmas, of the Mahayana, of the Sunyavada, especially of the Madhyamika teaching. So according to the Mahayana, according to the Madhyamika especially, what one has to realise ultimately was this voidness, and enlightenment, they maintained, consisted in the realisation of the ultimate voidness of all phenomena, the ultimate emptiness and the ultimate fullness too.

Now to pass on from that to something less sublime, less elevated, on the practical side the Mahayana did not stress the monastic life, did not stress asceticism nearly so much as the Hinayana had done. The Hinayana had tended to teach that if you were serious about the spiritual life, if you were serious about the attainment of enlightenment, then you should become a monk, you should retire from the world. But the Mahayana did not take quite that view, it did not actually discard monasticism, but it made the point that what was important was not whether you were living as a monk or whether you were living as a layman, what was important was that within the particular situation that you found yourself, you must make every possible effort to follow the bodhisattva path and realise the bodhisattva ideal. You should make every possible effort to help not only yourself but other living beings with whom you were in contact on the spiritual path. This was the view of the Mahayana.

Now the literature of the Hinayana was embodied in what we call the Tripitaka. We have now surviving in the Buddhist world only one complete Tripitaka, the Ti Pitaka of the Theravada school, which is one of the ancient Hinayana schools, and corresponding to that we have for the Mahayana not only the remnants of the Sanskrit version of the Tripitaka (I'm sorry to be so, so complicated) but we have the Mahayana sutras. The Mahayana sutras are discourses attributed to the Buddha, which do no doubt go back to the Buddha in some respects but which develop and elaborate his teachings to a very great extent also. We have for instance the Saddharma-Pundarika Sutra, the White Lotus Sutra, which is very, very important. I've no time to say anything about it. We've also got a whole collection - thirty-four or thirty-five Prajna-Paramita Sutras, or sutras devoted to

the Perfection of Wisdom, all of which have been translated by the late Dr. Edward Conze. And then we also have a work called the Gandavyuha, which is part of a much larger work called the Avatamsaka. These works in Chinese translation were very important for the development of Chinese Buddhism and the emergence of the Hua Yen and Kegon schools of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism.

Now I want to say just a few words about this Gandavyuha or Avatamsaka Sutra, because it links up with one or two things that have been said already in the course of this conference. I'm not going to say very much, I'm not going to put it in a theoretical form, I'm going to quote one of their illustrations. The Gandavyuha or Avatamsaka is concerned to depict the nature of reality. And it goes beyond even the Sunyavada in some respects. And the Gandavyuha or the Avatamsaka says, Reality is like this. Well there's a Japanese term for it which Japanese Buddhist scholars have developed it is go chi chi mu ge. Chi chi mu ge. Thing, thing, no different. The Chinese are very concise, and the Japanese too! But what does that mean? Well, there's a lot that could be said - one can always say a lot about the inexpressible! I'm just going to give you their illustration, their illustration. The illustration is called the Illustration of Indra's Net. Indra in Indian mythology - which is shared by Hindus and Buddhists alike - Indra has a wonderful net and this net is made entirely of jewels, and these jewels have a wonderful property, and it's this: that every single jewel in that net reflects all the other jewels and all the other jewels in the net reflect that one jewel. So each reflects all, all reflect each. Each reflects each, and all reflect all. And reality is like that, according to the Gandavyuha, according to the Avatamsaka. Things are not separate. Everything is contained in, reflected by, reflected in every other thing in the universe.

Now that is a rather so to speak static model, and Buddhism is not on the whole a static teaching, so one must not just imagine there being this sort of static net made up of these sort of static jewels, each with their static reflections, but each jewel is as it were moving in to all the other jewels, and all the other jewels are moving in to it, each individual jewel. And another illustration is given, that of a number of beams of light, mutually intersecting. You've got beams of light coming from all directions, but they pass through one another, they don't offer any obstruction. And this is what things are like in reality.

Now I couldn't help the other evening, or the other afternoon I think it was when I was listening to Professor (Bong), I couldn't help thinking of the Gandavyuha and of the Avatamsaka Sutra. I couldn't help thinking of Indra's net. And I can't help wondering - he's looking very thoughtful - whether Indra's net means anything to him.

Now so much for the Mahayana. We come on now to the third great phase of Indian Buddhism, which is that of the Vajrayana. The spiritual ideal of the Vajrayana is not the Arahant, it's not even the Bodhisattva, in a sense, and I must qualify that statement in a minute.

The ideal of the Vajrayana is the Siddha. Siddha literally means the Perfect One. In this last phase of Indian Buddhism there were in India eighty-four siddhas, eighty-four great beings who had attained this kind of spiritual perfection, this kind of spiritual perfection represented by the sid ideal. But what is the siddha? This is quite difficult to explain. It's quite sort of uncanny. The siddha's a rather strange figure. The siddha's a sort of transcendental magician. The stories of the lives of the siddhas are replete with all sorts of wonderful happenings, all sorts of miracles, all sorts of strange transformations. So with the siddhas you are in a completely different world, a sort of magical world. With the Vajrayana you might say magic comes back into Buddhism.

The Mahayana, despite the bodhisattva ideal and despite the sunyavada philosophy, had become a little bit - I won't say abstract, abstract isn't the word - it had become a bit too big as it were for ordinary people, a bit too vast, too cosmic, the scale was such that ordinary people were just staggered.

So the Vajrayana in its own way tried to bring everything down to earth, back to the individual human being, the individual human body even, the individual human mind, and it concentrated on various forms of esoteric meditation involving visualisations, chakras, nadis, bindu and so on and symbolic ritual. This was the great contribution of the Vajrayana. And it emphasised monastic life and asceticism very, very little indeed, if it all. I won't say anything more about that.

So these are the three great yanas, the Hinayana, the Mahayana, the Vajrayana, representing the three great stages of the development of Buddhism in India covering between them a period of about fifteen hundred years, from about 100 years roughly after the Buddha's enlightenment down to about 1200 of our era.

Now though I've spoken of these three yanas in this way one mustn't imagine them as being completely exclusive. The Mahayana took up into itself many elements of the Hinayana and the Vajrayana took up into itself many elements not only of the Hinayana but also of the Mahayana so that in the end you had a sort of triyana Buddhism which was eventually transplanted to Tibet - more about that in a minute.

But Buddhism was not only developing in India. During this vast period, this sixteen hundred year period, Buddhism was also expanding throughout Asia. It was expanding to South-East Asia, it was expanding to China and to Japan and to Mongolia, to Central Asia, to Java and Sumatra, it was expanding all over Asia. But we notice here an interesting thing. Buddhism went to different parts of the East at different periods. Buddhism went to some countries of the East during the first five hundred year period when the Hinayana was dominant, and that's why we find even today the countries to which Buddhism went during that period following still that form of Buddhism. This is why say in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, we find today Theravada Buddhism, which is a form of the Hinayana, we don't find Mahayana and we certainly don't find Vajrayana. Vajrayana in fact in those countries is rather frowned upon I'm afraid.

And we find that in the case of China and Japan, Buddhism went to those countries during the second five hundred year period when the Mahayana was dominant, and we find those countries following even today - to the extent that they do follow Buddhism - following it in one or another of its Mahayana forms, or one might say Hinayana-cum-Mahayana forms. And then during the third great phase of development of Buddhism in India Buddhism spread to Tibet and through Tibet to Mongolia and the whole Himalayan region. Now at that time the Vajrayana was dominant in India so to Tibet went Hinayana plus Mahayana plus Vajrayana with a very definite emphasis on the Vajrayana, on the so-called Tantric Buddhism. And that is why we find even today that in Tibetan Buddhism there is a sort of synthesis of elements derived from the Hinayana and the Mahayana and the Vajrayana with an overall emphasis on the Vajrayana, though that emphasis is rather stronger perhaps in the case of the Nyingmapas, Kagyupas and Sakyapas than it is in the case of the Gelugpas. So this is what we find happening. And we find that in each of these Buddhist countries of Asia, in each of these different areas, the form of Buddhism which was transplanted from India, whether of the Hinayana, the Mahayana or the Vajrayana or a combination of these, combined with the indigenous culture, whether of Ceylon, or Burma, or China, or Japan or Tibet to give us the particular form of Buddhism which we find extant in those countries nowadays.

Now this expansion of Buddhism throughout Asia happened over a period of many hundreds of years. I've given you the barest outline - it's even one might say only an outline of an outline, but with time ticking remorselessly on I can't really do anything more than that.

But while Buddhism was expanding in Asia outside India, it was losing ground in India itself. It was in fact declining in India itself. By about 1200 AD in fact by the end of the third five hundred year period that decline had become quite serious, and there were various factors at work, and again I can't go into this. In the course of my tour in India recently I devoted a whole lecture to this subject of why Buddhism disappeared from India because it's a subject in which Indians themselves are very, very interested. But I can't even give you a summary of that talk this morning. It depends - disappeared for various reasons, partly because a revived Hinduism borrowed certain things from Buddhism, partly because Buddhism borrowed certain things from Hinduism, partly because there was a revival of Brahminism, partly because there was an over-centralisation of Buddhism in the monasteries, partly because of the Islamic invasions as a result of which many Buddhist monasteries were destroyed, especially Nalanda, Vikramasila, (Audantrapuri)and so on, and partly, some people say, because a sort of creative spark had gone out of Buddhism itself. But be that as it may, for one reason and another, Buddhism gradually disappeared from India and was replaced largely by a revived, a renaissant orthodox Hinduism and to some extent by Islam. On the whole we may that orthodox Hinduism triumphed.

Orthodox Hinduism, by which I mean mainly the Brahmins and their teachings, had never been really happy with Buddhism. Some Brahmins of course had become Buddhists. Many of the Buddha's most prominent followers were themselves Brahmins - Sariputra was a Brahmin, Mahamaudgalyana was a Brahmin, there were his two leading disciples. Mahakasyapa was a Brahmin. But later on the Brahmins became more and more dissatisfied with Buddhism, and this was mainly because Buddhism threatened their very privileged social position. I am sure most of you are aware, most of you have a general idea, about the caste system in India. In India society is divided into castes. At the very top you have the Brahmins (castes of course are all hereditary) you have the Brahmins who are officially at least the teachers, the administrators, then you have the (Caprias) who are the warriors and fighters, then
you've got the Vaishas who are the traders, the business people, and then you've got the Shudras who are the serfs and lower even than the serfs you've got the outcasts, the untouchables, who've really no place in society at all, who shouldn't be even seen according to some orthodox Hindus.

And these castes, these four main castes are all sub-divided so that in India today you have altogether about two thousand castes, all mutually exclusive, all of course hereditary. And this means that there are all sorts of caste rules. You are not supposed for instance to intermarry with someone of another caste. If you are quite strict you are not supposed even to interdine with someone of another caste, and the lower castes, the lowest castes of all, who are so low that even in a sense they don't have a caste, they are what are called un-touchable. That is to say their touch pollutes. If you happen to touch them, or if their shadow happens to fall upon you or upon your food, well you become polluted and you cannot be touched, you cannot enter in relations with other members of your own caste until you've purified yourself from that pollution. I can't go into too many details but this whole system of caste is systematised in various Hindu works which are called Dharmashastras. The most important of the Dharmashastras is called the Manudharmashastra, it's a very big, thick volume, about 600 pages in the English translation, and he lays down the various duties - Manu, the sort of primeval law-giver of

the Hindus - lays down the rules to be observed by the different castes, and the penalties for breaking caste, it's a very, very rigid sort of document.

For instance, the person at the very bottom of the social scale, the Shudra, and of course the un-touchable, is not allowed to own property. He's not allowed to own property. He's not allowed to wear new clothing. He has to wear the cast-off clothing of the higher castes, according to Manu, and he's not allowed even to cook food for himself, he has to subsist on the leavings of the other castes, and if he does cook he can only cook in an earthen pot, he can't use a brass pot. And he has to live on the outskirts of the village, or a little separately from the village. And his only wealth it is said is dogs or donkeys. He cannot own anything except a dog or a donkey. And his attitude towards the higher caste people must be one of complete subservience. And this is all laid down. You can get the English translation yourself of Manushastra and read, this is all laid down by this great Hindu law-giver.

Now what happened was this, again I'm going forward very, very rapidly, in India today there are about in the total population, about 80 million people who are either Shudras, serfs, or who are untouchables. According to the constitution of India, according to modern Indian law, untouchability is a penal offence, but there have not yet been any prosecutions under these laws even though untouchability is wide-spread in India, especially in the villages. It is practised still all over the place as I have personally seen and personally witnessed.

Now in India there's a state called Maharastra which is a state of one might say western central India. Its capital now is Bombay. And in this state of Maharastra there's an un-touchable or ex-untouchable community called the Mahars. There's about four millions of them living in Maharastra. There are small groups of them attached to every village, they live outside the village under very terrible conditions, I've visited them myself many, many a time. They live in very miserable spots.

For instance, one village I visited the untouchables lived just outside the wall of the village. And they were compelled to live at the very spot where the drains all emptied. The drains, the drainpipes of the village sort of terminated there and all the effluent of the village sort of poured down there and that's where the untouchables were living and they weren't allowed to live anywhere much else. And I myself visited them in their houses there and actually had a meal there, keeping my fingers crossed, but there they had to live, that's how they were treated.

And I've met many of these Mahars, and they tell me that even in the younger days of some of the older people they were treated very, very badly indeed by the caste Hindus, especially the Brahmins of Maharastra, who are particularly strict and particularly rigid. Until quite recently if you were an untouchable you couldn't walk along a public road in the village during the day because your shadow might be thrown and it might you know fall upon a caste Hindu. And you had to wear an earthen pot around your neck to spit into because if you spat onto the roadside - and Indians are always spitting as you probably know - if you spat onto the roadside some caste Hindu might put his foot on it, so you carried a pot round your neck into which you spat. And also in some villages the untouchable had to carry a little brush to brush away the mark of his you know footsteps behind him. And people whom I know, friends of mine, who are of my own age, they have had to observe these things in their younger days. Now it's not as strict as this, but it's still pretty strict, and if you are living as an untouchable in India today your life can be pretty miserable.

There are still occasions - these occasions don't get into the Western press - they barely get into the Indian press, there are occasions when these Mahars in Maharastra are attacked, are murdered and women even raped, houses set on fire, by the caste Hindus, because they feel the untouchables are getting a bit beyond themselves, that is to say they're wearing decent clothes, they're wearing in some cases golden ornaments and they've got a bit of property, they're getting beyond themselves. This is not how they should be living, according to Manu's (edict).

When I visited India four years ago and moved about Maharastra, I found just a few weeks before my arrival two thousand huts of untouchables had been burned down and women had been paraded - untouchable women - had been paraded naked through the village streets and some of them raped, and quite a few untouchables were murdered. Something of this got into the Indian papers but it was I think hardly reported at all in the Western press. These things are kept out of the papers. The government of India I'm afraid doesn't like people in foreign countries learning about these things which are indeed rather disgraceful. To give the government of India its due it is rather ashamed of all these happenings but it finds it very difficult to prevent them. So this is still the situation.

Now among these Mahars there arose a leader, one might even say a liberator, called Dr. Bimrao Ambedkar. He was born as a Mahar, he was born as an untouchable, he was the first untouchable to matriculate, he was the first untouchable to do all sorts of things. He studied, he managed to study, with the help of (Ashrudkar Raja) who was sympathetic towards him, a member of the princely family, the ruler of the state at that time, he studied in London, in fact he studied at the School of Economics and he studied also in America, and he came back to India, he came back to Bombay and he started a great movement for the uplift of these untouchables, especially of his own Mahar community. It's a very long story, again I can't go into it, but he worked very, very hard for their uplift. And he was a man of outstanding energy and outstanding ability and eventually became Law Minister in the government of India after India became independent and was responsible, by a strange paradox, for framing or largely framing the Indian constitution and it is sometimes known as the modern Manu, the modern Indian law-giver. Of course he compiled a quite different constitution from what Manu did. But his work was frustrated to a great extent by the efforts of the caste Hindus and he eventually resigned from the government.

But he'd meanwhile been thinking what to do for the uplift of his own people. They were Hindus, even though they couldn't enter the Indian temples because they were untouchables, they were Hindus. He appealed to the caste Hindus to change their ways to allow the untouchables into the temples, not to treat them as untouchables, to treat them as human beings, because they were treated as almost worse than animals. So he appealed to the caste Hindus, but after appealing to them for thirty years he came to the conclusion that the caste Hindus were incorrigible, they weren't going to change their ways.

Now some of you may have seen this film Gandhi recently, and it's a very beautiful film, it gives a very noble picture of Gandhi, but it gives only one side of the picture, because the ex-untouchables do not like Gandhi at all. And they feel that Gandhi hasn't done anything for them. In fact they tend to consider him as an enemy. This may surprise you. But Dr. Ambedkar has written a book called - he wrote it some years ago - called 'What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables'. So if one wants to know the other side of the picture one should read this little book which is of about one hundred pages. It does give another side of the story.

So Ambedkar was eventually convinced that there was no future, no future with dignity and self-respect for the untouchables within the Hindu fold, and he came to the conclusion that they would have to change their religion. He was himself a deeply religious man. He was tempted of course to go over to Marxism, to go over to communism, but he felt that that would be fatal. He felt that man needed religion, man needed a spiritual ideal, so he started looking around.

He took a look at Christianity - well, he took a look at the mission of it, and didn't quite like that! He took a look at Islam - well, he thought if all the untouchables became Moslems well that would add to the problems of India. This was of course in pre-independence days, even before Pakistan appeared on the horizon. And he took a look at Sikhism. And in the end he took a look at Buddhism. And over a period of quite a number of years he made up his mind that the best thing for him and the best thing for his whole community for the Mahars would be to become Buddhists, because in Buddhism there is no caste system. And also Buddhism is a religion, a spiritual teaching, of Indian origin, and this point weighed with him quite strongly.

So he decided that they should all become Buddhists. So again to cut a very long story short on the 14th of October 1956 in Nagpur he and several (lakhs) -that is to say several hundred thousand, I think about five hundred thousand altogether, of his followers became Buddhists by reciting Buddham Saranam Gacchami that is to say To The Buddha For Refuge I Go at a stroke, one minute they were Hindus, next minute they were Buddhists. And after that he moved around Maharastra converting them by the hundreds and the thousands. But unfortunately he lived only for six weeks after that. Only for six weeks.

And this is where I come, this is where I come in to the picture. You may have been wondering, if you'd had time to wonder about anything, well what had happened to me. Well this is where I come into the picture. I happened to arrive in Nagpur on the day that Ambedkar died. He died in Delhi where I met him a little while before. I happened to arrive in Nagpur on the day that he died.

So let's go back a little bit. Let me tell you a little bit about myself, just a very few facts. I was born in London and when I was about sixteen I came upon two remarkable Buddhist texts, one was the Diamond Sutra, which is one of the Perfection of Wisdom or Prajnaparamita Sutras, the other was the Sutra of Hui Neng which is the same work. And when I read these two works at the age of sixteen I felt that I'm a Buddhist. And I considered myself a Buddhist. And a little while later I went along to the Buddhist Society, joined the Buddhist Society, met Christmas Humphreys and continued with my Buddhist studies, started in fact writing articles about Buddhism. But then something rather unfortunate happened - or at least it seemed unfortunate at the time, which was that I was conscripted into the Army.

I say seemed unfortunate because actually the Army took me to India, the Army took me to Ceylon, the Army took me to Singapore, all the places I wanted to visit. The Army was very kind to me, very providential! My duties were light, so I spent most of my time while I was in the Army in the East in Hindu ashrams and Buddhist viharas, and I actually started my career as a lecturer on Buddhism while I was still in the Army. I started it in Singapore.

But then war came to an end, I left the army, I stayed on in India, and I started living as a wandering monk, a wandering ascetic, and I wandered on foot over well, over many parts of South India and I was eventually ordained as a Buddhist monk. Now the story of my wanderings is contained in a book which I wrote some years later called The Thousand

Petalled Lotus. Please don't be misled by the title. I'm not presenting myself as a thousand petalled lotus! But the title rather appealed to the publishers if the truth must be known - I submitted a short list and that's the one that really caught their fancy! So, you know, authors are not in a position to argue with publishers, so it was The Thousand Petalled Lotus. So I mention this not only in passing because Malcolm has reminded me that there are still a few copies unsold! So if anyone is interested in the story of my wandering life in South India as a wandering monk, as an ascetic at that time, well that's the book that they should read.

Well I went up eventually after being ordained as a sramanera or novice monk, I went up into Nepal, I spent some time there. That was of course before the modernisation of Nepal - at that time there were only two motor cars in Nepal at that time - how wonderful! One belonged to the king and the other belonged to the Prime Minister. Everybody else had to walk! And I spent a year in Benares studying Pali, Abhidharma and so on, and then I went up to Kalimpong, I was rather left in Kalimpong by my teacher, and I started up Buddhist activities there.

And I got into contact at that time with Dr. Ambedkar, with whom I had several meetings, and this of course takes us up to the year 1956, so I happened to be on a lecture tour. That was the year of the celebration of the 2,500th anniversary of Buddhism. I'd been to Delhi at the invitation of the government of India, I'd given some lectures there, I'd met Dr. Ambedkar, and then I'd come to Bombay and then I'd moved on to Nagpur. So I arrived in Nagpur in the morning. I remember this very well. And rather to my astonishment at the station there were two thousand people to meet me. And they took me in procession to the place where I was to stay and I had a little rest, I had something to eat, and then at three o'clock there was a knocking on the door, which is rather unusual, and someone was shouting. So someone burst in and said, "Dr. Ambedkar is dead. We've just had the news from Delhi."

So this threw all his followers into consternation, you can imagine, because only six weeks before, under his leadership, under his guidance, they'd all become Buddhists and now he'd died. So there was a danger that the whole movement would collapse. So people came to where I was staying and they wanted - there were about 5,000 people outside - and they wanted me to speak to them and console them. But that wasn't possible because there were no loudspeaker arrangements, so I sent them away and said I'd speak to them in the evening, but make arrangements for a loudspeaker, or a lot of loudspeakers.

So we met in a place called the (Kastoorchand) Park, I remember it very well, and we met late at night, we met at seven o'clock at night. And it was dark. They hadn't had time to erect a proper platform, in fact they were too upset, and I gave my talk standing up on a rickshaw. But there were loudspeakers. And as I stood I could see people coming from all directions of Nagpur, and they were coming in the darkness in total silence.

Now you may or you may not realise that, but to get total silence in India is almost impossible. You know, when I give a talk you all sit and you listen quietly, but in India it's not like that. You've got to begin with several thousand people, but quite often fifty ladies over there will start up a vigorous discussion! - I'm sorry to say it's usually the ladies - start up a vigorous discussion which will eventually drown the sound of your voice and they will have to be requested to keep quiet! So that's what you get in India, it's very difficult to get complete silence. But on that occasion we got it quite spontaneously. People were coming in procession, in single file, from all directions, converging on this park, each carrying a single lighted candle. And they just gathered there. And in the end there were one hundred thousand people.

And I was the only one who could speak, because everybody else, as soon as he stood up to speak - better to say Dr. Ambedkar's leading followers - they just couldn't speak, they were so overcome by emotion. And as you know Indians express their emotions much more freely than people do in England. They'd just come up to the microphone but as soon as they tried to say anything they'd just burst into tears and they had to sit down. So the only one who didn't burst into tears - being English - was me. So I had to speak, and I spoke saying that Ambedkar had started this movement, he'd advised them to become converted to Buddhism and that was the way it had to be, the movement had to continue even though Ambedkar was dead.

So I got around Nagpur. I think in the course of four days I gave thirty-five lectures in thirty-five different places, just trying to keep things going. And because of that my connections with the ex-untouchables became very intimate indeed. And thereafter every winter I used to go down to the plains, especially to Maharastra, especially to Nagpur, Poone, Bombay, those sort of places, and I used to give lectures, I used to hold classes and courses, trying to instil something of Buddhist teaching and Buddhist practice into them.

Anyway, from what I've said you can understand people's very, very strong feeling for Dr. Ambedkar, that is to say, his followers' strong feeling, the Mahars', the ex-untouchables' strong feeling for him. No doubt you understand, you realise, that people in India have got a very strong feeling for Mahatma Gandhi, you could see that from the film. But the feeling that the ex-untouchables have for Ambedkar goes far beyond, as I've seen myself on numberless occasions, any feeling that anybody has for Mahatma Gandhi. But it's only his own followers who have this feeling because they know what it's like to be an untouchable so they're correspondingly grateful to him for having liberated them from the slavery of untouchability.

Now, in 1964 I returned to England. And eventually in 1967 I started the FWBO as described in Subhuti's book, Buddhism For Today, which came out incidentally only the day before yesterday, so here we have the very first copies to be available. But though I was so busy with work in England and other parts of Europe, even in America and New Zealand, I didn't forget the ex-untouchables, in fact I couldn't forget them. But for the time being I felt I couldn't do very much. The situation in India had become very confused, especially politically confused, so I thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to give my work there a rest for a while and to concentrate on doing something in the West, especially in England.

But I certainly didn't forget the ex-untouchables, and after a few years some of my English pupils, they went to India where they started up activities among the ex-untouchables, so that now we have a quite thriving movement among the ex-untouchables. We have ex-untouchable members strange to say of the Western Buddhist Order, which in India is known as the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayak Gana, which I won't try to translate. It means just very roughly Western Buddhist Order, or World Buddhist Order even. And we have not only things like lectures on Buddhism, publications on Buddhism, lots and lots of publications, mainly in the Marati language, but we've also started up really social activities, because they're still very, very depressed economically and socially, and we're especially doing our best to set up a medical centre. And to that end we've created an organisation known as Aid For India which is a charitable trust concerned with raising money in England, in the West generally in fact, to support our social work, not our religious work but our social work especially our medical work, in India and to date mainly in the form of covenants that trust has succeeded in raising some £2 million pounds which is being spent in India for that

particular purpose. And I myself visit India, visit my ex-untouchable friends from time to time, and that's how I came to be there only last year on the three-month lecture tour.

Now the question that arises, is what is the significance of this movement in India, this movement especially of conversion to Buddhism, and why am I talking about it this morning? The reason why I'm talking about it this morning is that it shows, it certainly showed so far as I was concerned, that great social changes really could be brought about by religious, even by spiritual means. Can be brought about non-violently. Though there is a great deal of discrimination against the untouchables, or ex-untouchables in India, though they still suffer quite badly at the hands of the caste Hindus, a great change has in fact taken place, and that change has taken place mainly in the minds of the untouchables themselves. They don't feel any longer that they are untouchables. They feel that they are human beings. They're not animals or lower than animals. They're human beings. And this they were not allowed to feel before.

I remember in the very early days, twenty and twenty-five years ago, when I was going around among these people I often used to ask them individually, I used to ask men and women even children, what difference has this conversion to Buddhism made for you? Do you feel different? And they all gave me the same answer, wherever I went, wherever I asked. They said that now we are Buddhists we feel free. Because they felt before bound by the caste system, weighed down by the caste system, enslaved by the caste system, enslaved by this concept of untouchability, but now they felt free. They were Buddhists, they were human beings.

I don't want to emphasise this question of conversion to Buddhism too much. It doesn't have a quite pleasant ring, especially when you think of missionaries trying to convert people to Christianity. But they feel now that they are human beings, and the fact that it is Buddhism that has helped them to feel that they are human beings is perhaps in a sense accidental. But they feel that they are human beings, they feel that they are free. And because they feel that they are free a tremendous amount of energy has been liberated. When you feel free you can do anything, if you're a free human being with self respect and with dignity and with a proper position in society you feel that you can do anything, so there's been a tremendous movement of uplift on all fronts among these ex-untouchables, especially among the Mahars who are in the forefront of things. There's been great economic improvement, educational improvement, cultural improvement, they look different, they speak differently, they bear themselves differently, they can look even the Brahmin in the eye. Before they could hardly look at the Brahmin, even from a distance, couldn't even allow themselves to be seen.

So one can see from this that change is possible, not only individual change, but change of a whole society by as it were religious, by spiritual means, spiritual ideals, a spiritual vision. I think this is the important thing, this is the lesson that we can learn. It's not enough to talk, it's not enough to think, we must see actual changes, changes in society taking place around us. In the course of this weekend at this conference we've done quite a lot of talking. Well, I've done quite a lot of the talking myself - in fact I've done exactly twice as much as I expected I should have to do. But all right, that's necessary, it's good to talk, it's good to exchange ideas. It's good to think, but thought and talk they must issue sooner or later in action. And not only action in the form of or the sense of the transformation of the individual, but even of the transformation of society itself.

And I feel that we would not have achieved our objective here at this conference if we simply thought and talked and went away and did perhaps more thinking and more talking but perhaps just on a smaller scale. We have also to do something, we have also to work and we have also to change society, and I hardly need tell you how badly society

needs changing. We can of course pity the ex-untouchables and in many ways their condition is a very pitiful one and was a very pitiful one, but in some ways our position is much worse. I couldn't help noticing among the ex-untouchables how emotionally positive they were despite their very depressed position, despite their poverty, despite the discrimination of this practice against them, they're a very warm, a very friendly, a very positive even (….) a very happy people. Well I don't want to speak about Europeans generally, but perhaps the English at least aren't always like that, aren't always overflowing with joie de vivre - even our friends from Europe notice it! So something is wrong here. There are other larger things which are wrong, which I don't want to go into now, but which must be at the back of all our minds in one way or another all the time.

So all that has to be changed. Planet Earth has really a wonderful opportunity. But it's in a quite at the same time a terrible position. We can either have one world spiritually at least or no world. The choice is before us. And I hope that the deliberations that have taken place at this conference, I hope the thoughts that we've had and the thoughts that we've heard expressed will help us all to realise that we've got to do as much to transform life, to transform society in the West as Ambedkar had to transform among the Mahars in India in the East.

So I think we should go forth - I hope I'm not taking over Sir George's functions, or his peroration here - but I think we should go forth from this conference determined that we're not only going to just think and talk but we're also going to do. We're going to transform ourselves and we're going to transform at least our bit of the world.