

Lecture 163: The Journey to Il Convento - Edited Version

WE HAVE ALL MADE THE JOURNEY to Il Convento. Most of you made it for the first time, a few for the third or even the fourth time. Of those who have made the journey for the first time most have made it in the hope of being ordained during the three months we shall be together here, and it is to them in particular that these remarks are addressed, even though what I have to say will also be applicable to those who have made the journey to Il Convento not in the hope of being ordained, for they are already ordained, but in order to help others to prepare themselves for ordination.

Addressing myself, then, to those of you who have made the journey to Il Convento for the first time, and have made it in the hope of being ordained, I wonder to what extent you realize the significance of this journey, and the real nature of its connection with your being ordained here. Initially, when you received your invitation to this pre-ordination course, it might have seemed to you that the journey to Il Convento was no more than a means to an end, the end being, of course, to participate in 'Tuscany 84', and, hopefully, to be ordained. The actual process of getting here, it might have seemed, had no special significance. It was, perhaps, something to be got through as quickly and cheaply as possible, the main idea being that one should transport oneself from London or Glasgow or wherever to Il Convento with the minimum of fuss and bother. On the other hand, when you received your invitation it might have occurred to you that the journey to Il Convento presented an opportunity of enjoying something you had not, perhaps, been able to enjoy for a long time, especially if you had been working in an FWBO co-op, i.e. a holiday, either with one of your spiritual friends or, less mindfully, in company of a rather different type. But even if you were concerned simply to get here, or simply to enjoy a little holiday en route, it will almost certainly have dawned on you, sooner or later, that the journey to Il Convento was more than just a means to an end, more than just an agreeable interlude, and that it had a significance of its own that it was not easy to formulate in conceptual terms. Indeed, for some of you it might have seemed that the more familiar you became with those magic words Il Convento, Batignano, Grosseto, and the more mantra-like the way in which they rolled off your tongue, the more the phrase 'the journey to Il Convento' came for you to assume overtones of a mysterious and even archetypal nature.

That this should be so is not surprising. On more than one occasion I have spoken in terms of our acting out, in the course of our lives, what I have called our personal myth, and the various journeys we make are often an important part of that myth. The journey is, in fact, a myth in its own right, so to speak, or rather it is an archetype which finds expression in many myths and symbols, many legends and stories, though without being exhausted by them and without being identical with any or all of them. Thus we have the voyage of the Argo, or Jason's journey in quest of the Golden Fleece; Odysseus's ten-year journey from 'the ringing plains of windy Troy' back to his home in rocky Ithaca; the Chosen People's still more protracted journey up from Egypt into the Promised Land; Monkey's journey to the West, i.e. from India, from which he and his companions returned to China with the false scriptures, the ones that had writing on them; the prophet Mohammed's Night Journey from Mecca to Jerusalem up through the heavens; Dante's journey through the Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso; Christian's journey from the City of Destruction to the Heavenly Jerusalem; Basho's journey from the Far North, and many other journeys by land and sea, through the air and through worlds and even universes. All these journeys possess, some of them more obviously than others, a significance that is not exhausted by their literal, surface meaning. This being the case it is only to be expected that a journey as crucial as the journey to Il Convento, that is to say, the journey to the venue of ordination, with all that ordination implies, should be imbued with a very special significance, even though that significance might not be immediately apparent.

To begin with, the journey to Il Convento is a journey from West to East. Most of you started your journey in England, and even those of you who did not actually start it there spent some time in England before setting out on the journey to Il Convento. The East is, of course, the source of light, for that is where the sun rises, and from time immemorial a journey towards the East has been a journey towards the light, or a spiritual journey. In medieval Iran there was even a school of mystic philosophers known as the Orientals (ishraqiya), in the sense of those who were 'oriented' or who turned themselves in the direction of, and travelled towards, the 'Orient' or world of supersensitive realities, and who spoke of entry into that world in terms of arriving at an 'oriental' knowledge ('ilm ishraqi). In more recent times a distinguished German author has spoken of a mysterious 'Journey to the East' undertaken not by one person only but by a number of people, and has even written a book with that title. Thus the journey to Il Convento is significant in that inasmuch as it is a journey to the East, it is, at the same time, a spiritual journey, or a pilgrimage. One might, of course, object that Il Convento is not very far east of England and that a real journey to the East would take one not to Italy but to India, not to Batignano but to Bhaja. That would be quite true, in a sense, and perhaps there is something to be said for our holding these pre-ordination courses further afield than we do, so that it would be a question not of a journey to Il Convento, or even a journey to Bhaja, but of a journey to Sarnath or Buddha Gaya. Nevertheless it must not be forgotten that

the journey to the East does not really terminate at any particular point, either in the literal or the metaphysical sense. All that is really necessary is that our journey, whether long or short, should be a journey to the East, i.e. in the direction of the East, and that it should be a journey to the East in the real sense of the term. Whether it is a journey to Il Convento, or to Buddha Gaya, or even to Padmaloka, is of quite secondary importance.

Though the journey to Il Convento is a journey from west to east, it is also, at the same time, a journey from north to south. It is a journey from the Protestant north to the Catholic south, or even, to some extent, to the pagan south. It is a journey from cold to warmth, from gloom to sunshine, from pink complexions and blond hair to swarthy complexions and black hair, from pine forests to olive groves, from barley fields to vineyards, from the grim figures of Thor and Wotan to the more pleasing ones of Ceres and Dionysius. It is a journey from skies and seas that are nearly always grey to seas and skies that are rarely anything but blue. In another sense it is a journey from the surface of things to the depths, from the conscious to the unconscious mind, from brain-cells to bloodstream (as D.H. Lawrence might say), from the modern to the archaic, from the present to the past, from the rational to the irrational. In order to go forward we have to go back, or rather, we have to go forward and back at the same time. In order to move in the direction of the east we have to move in the direction of the south. In order to travel towards the region of light and life we have to travel towards - and through - the region of darkness and death.

Besides being a journey from west to east, and from north to south, the journey to Il Convento is not a straight journey but a crooked or zigzag journey. Not only have most of you not come here by the most direct route possible, but you have made all sorts of detours, so that if all your different routes were to be plotted on a map of Europe it would show not a single beaten track but a complicated network of lines all of which eventually converged on Il Convento. Leaving aside those who came here by the shortest and quickest route they could find - as well, perhaps, as those who treated themselves to a holiday - the reason for this is, obviously, that you took advantage of the journey to Il Convento to do a little sight-seeing and that, with a certain amount of overlapping, you did your sight-seeing in different places. But why did you decide to see something of Rome and Naples (I am taking hypothetical examples, since I do not know exactly where each one of you went), rather than something of Venice and Ravenna? What was it, precisely, that drew you to the red-ribbed dome of the Santa Maria di Fiore in Florence, as it seemingly floats above a sea of red roofs? Why were you so keen to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa? What sort of mental picture did you have of these places, or what did they mean to you, that you decided to visit one rather than another of them, or allow yourself to be drawn away from the direct route in this direction rather than in that? Practical considerations played a part, no doubt, to some extent, but in the ultimate analysis the deciding factor must have been subjective or even largely unconscious. Nor is that all. In Rome and Naples, as in Venice and Ravenna and any of the innumerable other places you may have visited, there will have been many churches and palaces, many art galleries and museums, many gardens and grottoes. What was it that led you to one rather than to another of them, or caused you to linger in front of this painting or piece of sculpture rather than in front of that? Last year an Order member who saw Michaelangelo's David in the Academy at Florence afterwards reported that he was so overwhelmed that he felt like prostrating himself before it. Why did he not (apparently) feel like prostrating himself before Orcagna's Tabernacle - or, for the matter of that, before Donatello's David? In making your way from one city or town of Italy to another, from one church or museum to another, and from one painting or sculpture to another, you were no doubt directed not so much by logic as by what may be described as a sort of irrational wisdom, in the sense of an obscure awareness of an inner need, and it was because you were so directed that your journey to Il Convento was not straight but crooked in both the literal and the metaphysical sense, for as Yeats tells us:

Wisdom is a butterfly And not a gloomy bird of prey.

It is a butterfly because a butterfly floats from flower to flower, or flutters aloft in the air, in zigzag fashion, as you must have observed in the course of your walks in the vicinity of Il Convento, where the butterflies are apparently more abundant than they are in most parts of England, as well as sometimes being of an unfamiliar species. In this connection I remember reading somewhere that in China the streets were formerly built not straight but crooked, with many sudden bends, because people believed that evil spirits moved only in straight lines, and could not go round corners. In modern times, of course, many Western cities have been laid out on a grid plan, with one perfectly straight avenue crossing another exactly at right angles. Paris, for instance, was rebuilt on this kind of plan in the middle of the nineteenth century, the reason being that in the event of an armed uprising the broad, straight avenues would enable the government to bring its artillery to bear on the revolutionary masses with maximum effect. Bullets and artillery shells, like evil spirits, cannot go round corners.

But to return to the journey to Il Convento. In the course of your sight-seeing, in the case of those of you who did any, you will have been led to one building rather than to another, and have lingered in front of this sculpture or painting rather than in front of that, not so much because you found it of special historic or artistic interest (though this may, of course, actually have been the case at times), but rather because you were deeply moved by it and because it possessed, for you at least, a significance that you were at a loss to explain. For reasons that are, perhaps, obvious, you will probably have been affected in this way more by sculptures and paintings than by buildings, and more by individual sculptured or painted figures than by groups of figures or by landscapes. Be that as it may, the likelihood is that a certain work of art moved you so deeply because it represented an image or symbol, and because this image or symbol embodied an archetype - though it is important not to make too hard and fast a distinction either between the image or symbol and the sculptured or painted form by which it is represented, or between the archetype and the image or symbol in which it is embodied. Moreover, if you were sufficiently receptive to what you saw, and sufficiently sensitive, the irrational wisdom that directed you to a particular sculpture or painting in the first place will, by virtue of your contact with that work of art, have been clarified and strengthened to such an extent as to be transformed into imagination, by which I do not mean fancy but a faculty for the perception of images, in the sense of archetype-images or images that are the embodiments of archetypes. That faculty once developed, you will have moved from one work of art to another, or from one image to another, finding each work of art, and each image, more deeply moving and more highly significant than the last. Thus the journey to Il Convento is not only a crooked journey from one image to another. In fact, it is a journey through a world of images, or through an imaginal world, and herein lies its greatest significance. Now all this obviously requires explanation, and you may well be thinking that I am moving ahead far too rapidly. You may even be thinking that your own journey to Il Convento does not correspond very closely to the journey to Il Convento as described by me. At this point perhaps the best thing I can do, therefore, is to give you one or two examples, from my own experience, of the sort of thing about which I have been speaking.

These examples are not drawn from any of my own journeys to Il Convento, but they are at least drawn from a journey to Italy. This journey took place in the summer of 1966, when I passed through Italy on my way to Greece, entering the country by way of the Gothard Pass and leaving it from the port of Brindisi. It was my first visit to Italy, and since I had been intensely interested in Italian art, especially Italian Renaissance art, ever since my childhood, I wanted to make the fullest possible use of my opportunity. Wherever I went I tried to see every church, palace, museum, and art gallery, and every sculpture and painting that each one of these contained. In this way I traversed northern Italy, passing through Milan, Bergamo, Verona, Vicenza, Venice, Padua, and Ravenna. Probably I saw hundreds of buildings and thousands of sculptures and paintings. As the days went by, however, I became aware that I was being drawn to some paintings (for instance) much more than by others, and that the attraction often had more to do with the theme of the paintings than with the quality of their execution or the reputation of the artist. One of the themes, or subjects, by which I was most drawn was that of St Jerome. St Jerome is one of the four Fathers of the Latin Church. He lived in the latter half of the fourth and the first quarter of the fifth century, and was a contemporary of St Augustine, another of the Fathers of the Latin Church, with whom he had an acrimonious correspondence. When he was already middle-aged St Jerome left Rome and went to live in the Holy Land, at Bethlehem, and it is at this stage of his career that he is usually depicted in Christian art. In the course of that journey in 1966 I must have seen two or three dozen St Jeromes, and I have seen many others since, either in the original or in reproduction. He is usually represented either in the desert, or in his cell, and either on his knees in front of a crucifix, or at his desk. I was drawn most of all by those paintings which represented him in his cell, or study, with an hourglass in front of him, a lion (which he had tamed) sleeping at his feet, his red cardinal's hat hanging on the wall (due to his association with the reigning pope he was traditionally regarded as a cardinal, though cardinals as such did not come into existence until many centuries later), a large volume open before him, and a quill pen in his hand. St Jerome was, of course, responsible for the production of the Vulgate, the standard Latin version of the Bible, which was in use throughout the Middle Ages, and when represented in his study he is generally understood to be engaged in this great work. Incidentally, he is represented as a very old man, with a long white beard. Sometimes his cell-study is practically bare, sometimes furnished with every scholarly comfort and convenience. Somehow this theme, or image, took hold of my mind. St Jerome was the Wise Old Man, and, as you know, the Wise Old Man is one of Jung's Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious. That he was engaged in the work of translation, especially that of rendering the word of God into ordinary human speech, meant that something hidden in the depths was being brought to the surface, or brought from darkness into light. Thus St Jerome was the Alchemist - another embodiment of the Wise Old Man. His cell-study (sometimes depicted as a cave) was the Alchemist's laboratory. Indeed, it was the Alchemist's alembic, in which the Red King united with the White Queen, or his crucible, in which lead was transmuted into gold. In this way the image of St Jerome in his study tended to merge with other images, not only of the Alchemist in his laboratory, but also of the Philosopher in his study - especially Rembrandt's Philosopher, as he sits with the staircase spiralling up through the darkness behind him.

No doubt I was drawn to the image of St Jerome partly because of my personal situation at the time. I was living in the desert. I had left the 'Rome' of collective, official, even establishment, Buddhism, and was seeking to return to the origins of Buddhism in the actual life and experience of the Buddha and his immediate disciples. Not only that. I was trying to teach Buddhism in the West, which meant I was trying to communicate the spirit of the Dharma in terms of Western rather than in terms of Eastern culture. I was thus a translator, with all that that implies in the way of seeking to fathom the uttermost depths of what one is trying to translate so that one may translate it faithfully, i.e. bring its meaning to the surface, or from darkness into light. Thus I was drawn to the image of St Jerome, and was able to see that image as an embodiment of the archetype of the Wise Old Man as 'Translator' and Alchemist, because I had a personal affinity with that image, or because there was something in me that corresponded to that image. In other words, I had possessed, or had developed, a faculty for the perception of that kind of image. I possessed an imagination or, since the word imagination is often used in a pejorative sense, I possessed at least the rudiments of what has been termed the imaginal faculty. This imaginal faculty enabled me to see in the figure of St Jerome more than what was given by the paintings themselves, whether considered as 'works of art' in the modern sense or as examples of traditional religious iconography. It enabled me to see the figure of St Jerome - who in a sense was no longer St Jerome - as in fact belonging to a completely different plane. It enabled me to see him as an image that had its existence in a world of images or in an imaginal world - a world to which one has access by virtue of the imaginal faculty.

Another image to which I was drawn at that time was the image of the Angel, though I was not drawn to it as much as to the image of St Jerome. Indeed, I must have been drawn to this particular image quite early in life, for I can remember executing a whole series of pencil drawings of angels when I was thirteen or fourteen. These angels I depicted as hovering in, or flying through, the air, and since one of them carried a sword he was, I suppose, the archangel Michael. Some years later, during my stay in Kalimpong, I was deeply impressed by the image of the Angel as he appears in Rilke's Duino Elegies. More recently, having allowed my interest in angels to lapse for a number of years, I have taken up the study of this image again and have even devoted a certain amount of thought to it. Some of you may recall that thanks to reproductions of the well known painting in the National Gallery, London, the image of Tobias and the Angel is now well established in the FWBO as an image of kalyana mitrata or spiritual friendship. You may have encountered other versions of the same subject in the course of your journey to Il Convento, as I myself did in the course of both my 1966 visit to Italy and my four journeys to Il Convento. That you should see paintings of Tobias and the Angel on the way to Il Convento is, of course, wholly appropriate, for your journey to Il Convento parallels Tobias's journey to Rages, and like him you need to be accompanied by an Angel, whether in visible or invisible form. Indeed, unless you are accompanied by an Angel the journey to Il Convento is not the journey to Il Convento at all, but only a journey.

Now both the image of St Jerome and the image of the Angel are Christian images, and you may be wondering to what extent these can be of significance to a Buddhist. The difficulty is more apparent than real, and is perhaps best resolved by a reference to Jung's Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious. As I think is well known, in studying the dreams of his patients Jung discovered that these often reproduced, quite spontaneously, themes and motifs that play an important part in the various mythologies of mankind, as well as in the teachings of the different religions. Some patients, for instance, described, and even painted, circular figures which bore a remarkable resemblance to Buddhist mandalas. From all this Jung eventually concluded that there were various basic psychic patterns, or archetypes, which were common to the whole human race, both past and present, and which found expression in myths, in religious beliefs, in dreams, and in works of art. These common psychic patterns he termed the Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious. Though the patterns or archetypes were common to the whole human race, however, the various forms in which they expressed themselves were not. The forms were culturally determined, and therefore extremely varied. Thus although the images of St Jerome and the Angel are Christian images, they are Christian images only in the sense that in them an archetype which is of universal significance and value has been clothed in a Christian, Italian, Renaissance form - even in a form peculiar to a particular artist. It is for this reason that it is possible for a Christian image to be of significance to a Buddhist. What the Buddhist is drawn to is not so much the Christian form of the image as the archetype of which that image is an embodiment, and it is therefore really the archetype that is of significance to him. In some cases, of course, the form taken by a Christian image, e.g. the Crucifixion, will be so repugnant to Buddhist sentiment as to render it quite impossible for a Buddhist to be drawn to the image and, therefore, in this instance at least, to the archetype of which it is the embodiment. In other cases, such as the images of St Jerome and of the Angel, the fact that the form taken by the image is conditioned by, or belongs to, a culture with which the (Western) Buddhist happens to be familiar, and with which he feels a definite emotional connection, may even mean that he is drawn to it to a greater extent than he is drawn to its traditional Buddhist counterpart, where such exists, so that he is in the uncomfortable position of finding the Christian image of significance to him on account of its being the embodiment of an archetype of which he has a better intellectual understanding, and even a keener spiritual appreciation, in specifically

Buddhist terms. In yet other cases, both the Christian image and its Buddhist counterpart may be of significance to a Buddhist, and it may be clear to him that both images are embodiments, within their respective cultures, of one and the same archetype, even though he is at the same time fully aware that in Buddhism the archetype is incorporated within a much broader and more meaningful context.

For me this was especially so with regard to the image of the Angel, which was probably one of the reasons I was drawn to it. The image of the Angel, though Christian, not only has its immediate antecedents in Classical antiquity, but also its counterparts in practically all other religions and cultures, as a glance at the illustrations to Peter Lamborn Wilson's well known book, *Angels*,²⁵ will be sufficient to show. In the case of Buddhism, the principal counterparts of the image of the Angel are the deva and the Bodhisattva, as represented in traditional Buddhist art. Indeed, the Buddhist may well feel that the image of the Bodhisattva is the embodiment par excellence of the particular archetype in question. Indeed, he may feel that the archetype of which the Bodhisattva is the embodiment, and which the image of the Angel reflects in a different cultural context and on a lower spiritual level, is in fact nothing less than the Archetype of Enlightenment, as it may be termed, and as such immeasurably transcends the archetypes that were the subject of Jung's discoveries. This of course implies an enlargement of the meaning of the term 'archetype' far beyond the significance it possesses for any current system of psychology. It also implies a stratification, so to speak, of images, in accordance with the degree to which they are the embodiments of a particular archetype, and even, perhaps, a stratification of the archetypes themselves. This in turn implies a stratification, in the sense of an arrangement in a progressive, hierarchical order, of the faculty by which the images themselves are perceived, or rather, a stratification of the successive stages of its unfoldment or manifestation. Thus one arrives at the conception of a hierarchy of levels of the imagination, or imaginal faculty, corresponding to a hierarchy of levels of images and archetypes, or imaginal world. In Buddhism this imaginal world is known as the world - or worlds - of the gods, access to the different planes and sub-planes of which can be obtained through the cultivation of the corresponding mental state, in the form of a particular 'concentration' (dhyana) or sublime abode (brahma vihara).

But though I have spoken of the imaginal faculty, the expression should not, in a sense, be taken too literally. The imagination, or image-perceiving faculty, is not so much a faculty among faculties as the man - the spiritual man - himself. It is spoken of as a faculty because, in the case of the vast majority of people, it exists in such a rudimentary form that it appears to be simply a 'faculty' like, for instance, reason or emotion, or because it has not yet been developed or manifested at all. The imaginal faculty is, in reality, the man himself, because when one truly perceives an image one perceives it with the whole of oneself, or with one's whole being. When one truly perceives an image, therefore, one is transported to the world to which that image belongs and becomes, if only for the time being, an inhabitant of that world. In other words, truly to perceive an image means to become an image, so that when one speaks of the imagination, or the imaginal faculty, what one is really speaking of is image perceiving image. That is to say, in perceiving an image what one really perceives is, in a sense, oneself.

By this time you may be thinking that I have got rather a long way from the journey to Il Convento, but that is not really the case. Buddhism sees mundane existence as stratified into three great planes or 'worlds', each with its subsidiary worlds or sub-planes. These three worlds or planes (loka, dhatu) are those of (1) desire for sensuous experience (kama), (2) archetypal form (rupa), and (3) no archetypal form (arupa) or, perhaps we should say, extremely subtle archetypal form. 'Beyond' these three worlds there lies the Unconditioned or transcendental. In terms of spiritual cosmography the spiritual life consists of a journey from the world or plane of sensuous desire, through the worlds or planes of archetypal form and extremely subtle archetypal form, to the Unconditioned or transcendental, and it is of this archetypal journey that the journey to Il Convento is an image or symbol. Thus when you start your journey by leaving England you are not just leaving grey skies. What you are really doing is leaving your old interests and activities, your old habits and attachments, your old way of life, and even your old self. What you are really doing is leaving the world of sensuous desire. Similarly, when you visit this or that town or city en route, and do your sight-seeing, you are not just looking at churches and palaces, museums and art galleries, gardens and grottoes, not just admiring buildings, sculptures, and paintings. What you are really doing is moving from one image, i.e. archetype-image, to another, or travelling through a world of images. What you are really doing is traversing the world or plane of archetypal form. (The world or plane of extremely subtle archetypal form really falls outside the scope of the comparison - except, perhaps, in the case of those who spent some time in the Alps.) In the same way, when you arrive at Il Convento you arrive at the threshold of the transcendental, for you have made the journey to Il Convento in the hope of being ordained or, in more traditional language, of being able to go for Refuge to the Three Jewels, and not only are the Three Jewels essentially transcendental but the act of going for Refuge to them is, ultimately, transcendental too.

Thus the journey to Il Convento is not only a journey from west to east, and from north to south, not only a crooked or zigzag journey, not only an opportunity for sight-seeing. It is also an inner journey, an inner exploration, that takes one through the three great worlds or planes of mundane existence up to the very threshold of the transcendental. Of course, I hardly need tell you that however successfully you might have accomplished the journey to Il Convento in the literal sense - and the fact that you are here at all means that you have done at least that - in the metaphorical sense you have probably accomplished the journey only in the most rudimentary fashion. In particular, your journey through the world of images will probably have been of a very sketchy nature and have taken place at a comparatively low level. Indeed, it may have consisted in little more than a series of brief forays into unfamiliar regions where images loomed as though through mist rather than revealing themselves in brilliant sunshine against skies eternally blue. But even if this should not have been the case it does not, in a sense, matter very much. The real journey to Il Convento has to be made not once but many times. Each time you make the journey you make it in a more thoroughgoing fashion or, so to speak, at a higher level. It is like making your way up a mountain by a spiral path. Each time you circle the mountain you circle it at a higher level, but it is the same mountain that you are circling. Thus each time you make the journey to Il Convento and leave the world of sensuous desire, traverse the world of images, and arrive at the threshold of the transcendental, you do so in a fuller and more effective manner than you did before. Your old way of life, and your old self, is increasingly abandoned, while far from being a series of brief forays into unfamiliar regions, your journey through the world of images is a more and more protracted sojourn among archetype-images of ever increasing refinement, richness, beauty, and sublimity among which you feel more and more at home. Christian images will, no doubt, eventually be left far behind, and perhaps Buddhist images too, and one will find oneself in the presence of the archetypes which those images embody, and even in the presence of the archetypes of the archetypes.

But before that happens one will perhaps have realized that images are not, in fact, such fixed and definite things as one originally thought. Images are fluid. They can change, which means that their significance can change. Perhaps I can best illustrate what I mean with the help of a short story. In the course of my life I have written only six or seven short stories, though I have had ideas for many more, and the short story to which I refer has not actually been written down. The idea of it came to me a few weeks ago as a result of the sightseeing Prasannasiddhi and I had been doing in Pisa in the course of our latest journey to Il Convento. As you know, sightseeing can be quite tiring, especially when one is getting on in years, and I think the idea of the story must have come to me as a result of the feeling of tiredness I experienced one day after we had visited the National Museum of St Matthew, the Cathedral and Baptistry, the Leaning Tower, the Museum of the Sinopias, and several churches. The story began with two people coming to Italy on a sort of cultural tour. I imagined them visiting all the famous Italian cities, and seeing the great churches and palaces, the museums and art galleries, much as I had done in 1966. One day they happen to find themselves inside a particularly fine cathedral (and this is where the story really begins), equipped with the usual Crucifixions, Madonnas (both with and without Child), Annunciations, Saints, and Martyrs (being grilled, beheaded, sawn in two, broken on the wheel, shot full of arrows, torn with pincers, skinned alive, etc.), Nativities, Ascensions, Assumptions, and Last Judgements, together with sundry cherubs and putti. Since the place is so vast, and there is so much to see, the two friends spend several hours looking round the cathedral. Moreover, they are so interested in all the paintings and sculptures, which are of excellent quality, that they fail to notice that the place has gradually emptied and that the sacristan, thinking that everyone had left, has locked the massive bronze doors for the night. The younger of the two friends therefore goes in search of a side entrance that might still be open, while his older companion, feeling in need of a rest, sits down on a bench at the foot of one of the enormous Gothic pillars of the nave. By that time it is practically dark, and he has not been sitting there for more than a few minutes when he hears a confused sound of footsteps and voices. It is almost as though a party of sightseers had entered the cathedral. But it is not a party of sightseers. On lifting his head he sees in the dim light that now pervades the whole building an extraordinary sight. The sculpted and painted figures at which he and his friend had gazed so intently only a short while ago are now stepping down from their marble pedestals, and out of their carved and gilded frames, on to the floor of the cathedral. There are hundreds of them, and after a momentary pause some of them seem to have started moving down the aisle in his direction. The sound of footsteps and voices grows gradually louder as they approach.

What followed was the main part of the story, and was to have taken up the greatest amount of space, but since I have not worked it out in detail I can give you only a rough sketch of what happened. No doubt this will be enough for my present purpose. The idea was that once they had stepped down from their pedestals, and out of their picture-frames, the figures should all start behaving in a way that was not completely in accordance with their official character, so to speak. They were off duty, now that the cathedral was closed, and were free to behave as they liked. So Christ stretches his arms and says that he is glad to get down from that crucifix for a few hours, while the Virgin Mary complains that the Child gets heavier every day and she does not know how much longer she will be able to stand here holding him. As

for the Child himself, he is playing with some of the more mischievous-looking putti, and they are actually trying to use one of the cherubs, who is of course all head and wings, as a football. The Archangel Michael is also there. He lays aside his sword and his scales, takes off his shining armour, and starts doing press-ups in the middle of the nave. God the Father then comes along, having stepped down out of an enormous fresco of the Last Judgement. He is rather worried, and mutters into his beard, saying that he is fed up with judging people, and in any case thinks he has made quite a few mistakes. As if to confirm his suspicions, a crowd of figures out of the same fresco surround him and indignantly complain about the treatment they have received. Some of those who have been sent to heaven complain that it is a dull and boring place, and ask to be sent somewhere more interesting, while some of those who have been sent to hell complain that the devils do not give them any attention. They could stand anything except that, they say. Even poor old St Jerome is there. His back is stiff from spending so many hours at his desk, and he is glad to have a respite from that endless work of translation. As for the lion, having woken up, shaken his hide, and followed St Jerome out of the picture-frame, he takes a leisurely stroll down the aisle, pausing to rub himself against the legs of various Saints and Martyrs, all of whom have something to contribute to the proceedings. St John the Baptist remarks that it is nice to have his head back on again, while a female saint whose name I have forgotten makes a similar remark about her breasts. St Lawrence hopes that no one will mind him mentioning the fact that his gridiron is in need of repair, St Agnes confesses to St Mary Magdalene that she is tired of looking after all those lambs, while St Mary Magdalene confides to St Agnes that she thinks hair shirts don't really suit her any more. Salome, who is of course neither a saint nor a Martyr, asks her mother whether she ought not to learn a new dance, since Herod seems to be getting tired of the old one after all these years.

How the story developed from that point onwards I found it difficult to decide. Perhaps the complaints that the figures from the Last Judgement make to God the Father become so loud that the elder of the two friends, sitting there on his bench in the nave, gives a start, rubs his eyes, and finds that the sculpted and painted figures have returned to their pedestals and picture-frames, and that the place is again practically dark. Or perhaps the figures suddenly all become aware of his presence and make a concerted rush at him, or try to drag him up on to a pedestal, or into a picture-frame. Anyway, it has all been a dream, and he is now awake. His young friend is standing beside him, shaking him vigorously by the shoulder. He has found a side entrance still unlocked, he says, and they must hurry or it will be too late. Thus the short story ends. It is not, of course, a very original story. I have read one novel, and at least two short stories, in which the statues in a museum all come to life and have various adventures, and these may well have influenced me. Moreover, to make one's principal character undergo some highly unusual experience which, in the end, turns out to have been a dream, is a rather hackneyed device. Nonetheless, I hope that despite its shortcomings this latest short story of mine has been able to illustrate the point that images are not such fixed and definite things as one might have thought, and that their significance can change. Images and their significance are, in fact, changing all the time. The Angel as represented in Italian Gothic art is very different from the Angel as represented in Italian Renaissance art, and both are very different from the Angel as represented in Italian Baroque art, besides which there are within each of these periods great differences as between the Angel as represented by one artist and the Angel as represented by another. Thus over the period of a few hundred years the image of the Angel, together with the significance of that image, is seen to undergo a whole series of developments and transformations even within the limits of a single national culture.

Images can not only change; they can also be broken. They are 'broken' when they have lost all significance for us, a process which begins when we no longer perceive them with the imaginal faculty or, what amounts to much the same thing, when we no longer respond to the particular archetype they embody. In the literal sense, images are broken when the paintings and sculptures which are their embodiments are smashed or burned. This usually happens when the images themselves no longer have significance for us, as was the case with the Puritans when they smashed and burned the 'superstitious' paintings and sculptures that adorned the cathedrals and churches of England, or when their meaning is completely misunderstood, as was the case with the Muslim invaders of India who smashed and burned the 'idols' they discovered in the Buddhist temples and monasteries. Perhaps it is not without significance that the journey to Il Convento should be a journey to what was formerly a Christian monastery. Il Convento di Santa Croce, to give the place its full title, until a little less than two hundred years ago was occupied by a community of brown-robed Franciscan friars who in theory, at least, had 'come together' - the literal meaning of the word from which convent is derived - in order to live in accordance with the ideal of Christian perfection as exemplified by St Francis, the founder of their order. How long Il Convento di Santa Croce had by that time been in existence I do not know. It may have dated back to the Middle Ages, or it may have been a recent foundation. Whichever may have been the case, the friars were expelled, and the building itself badly damaged, about two hundred years ago, during the Napoleonic Wars - presumably at the time of Napoleon's conflict with the Papacy.²⁶ Whether the friars returned to their monastery after the downfall of the great tyrant I do not know, but if any of them did return, and if they

did so without delay, it must have given them great satisfaction to look - as we can still look today - from the olive groves of Il Convento down to the great coastal plain, and from there to the island of Elba, lying a dim grey shape on the horizon, behind its strip of blue sea, and to think that Napoleon was confined there: though it must have given them still greater satisfaction when, after the escape from Elba and the Hundred Days, he was finally confined to the island of St Helena, a much less pleasant place. On the other hand, human nature being what it is, they may have lamented his fall, and even offered up prayers on his behalf, for he had eventually made his peace with the Church and signed a concordat with the Pope, as many a tyrant had done before him, and as tyrants have done since.

In this connection, i.e. in connection with the subject of Napoleon, I remember that last year my own journey to Il Convento included four days in Paris. Among the places I went to see with Prasannasiddhi, as well as with Subhuti and S'ilabhadra, who were giving us their company so far as the French capital, was the Tomb of Napoleon. As might have been expected, this was a large and imposing structure in extremely bad taste and it was seemingly dedicated not just to the glorification of Napoleon Bonaparte but to the glorification of the spirit of militarism or, to put it more crudely, the spirit of war. To walk round inside the Tomb, with its clumsy neo-classical sculptures, and its vulgarly expensive marbles, was to make a foray into the world of the asuras or anti-gods, or into that world of aggression, competition, and conflict, that has to be left behind by anyone engaged on the journey to Il Convento. To make matters worse, a shop next door to the Tomb was doing a brisk business in Napoleonic postcards and souvenirs of every kind, including swords, suits of armour, and model soldiers. After visiting the Tomb I felt a strong urge to write an open letter to President Mitterand pointing out that if he really was a Socialist, and really believed in peace, he should close down the Tomb of Napoleon forthwith, since it was the negation of everything for which he stood. However, I did not write the letter, since I found it difficult to believe that anything so contrary to French national sentiment would be allowed to reach him. All the same, I am unwilling to give up the idea entirely, and may yet find a way of carrying it out. But that is another story.

The reason why it is not without significance that the journey to Il Convento should be a journey to what was formerly a Christian monastery is that that monastery is in a state of disrepair and dilapidation. What happened to it after the monks returned, if they ever did, I am unable to tell you. At some time during the last two hundred years the place was a glass factory, as the lumps of green vitreous material that strew the surrounding area testify, but for how long it was a glass factory I do not know. More recently it was used for agricultural purposes until it passed into the hands of the present owner, who uses the place, during the summer months, for putting on small-scale productions of seventeenth century Italian operas and other works - a fact which is also not without significance, though what that significance is I shall leave you to discover for yourselves. Yet despite having been put to such a variety of uses, Il Convento remains in much the same condition as, I imagine, it was left by Napoleon's troops after the expulsion of the friars. What was once the church is hardly even a shell, the roof having been ripped off, and the facade reduced to a heap of rubble. Though the cloister is more or less intact, several of the brick pillars are damaged, while hardly a trace remains of the frescoes that once covered the walls. The journey to Il Convento is thus a journey to a place of broken images. In the literal sense there are, indeed, not even any broken images, though on the occasion of my first journey to Il Convento I did see, before someone put it away in a cupboard, a cracked wooden figure of St Anthony of Padua that looked as though it was badly in need of a coat of paint. Since the journey to Il Convento is a journey to a place of broken images, the Going for Refuge which is the whole purpose of that journey takes place - and this is the point I really want to make - in the midst of broken images. We become Buddhists, in fact, in the midst of the ruins of Christian civilization and culture, and though the images of that culture may still draw us, to some extent, in their specifically Christian sense they no longer have any significance for us. That is in fact why we go for Refuge. That is why in the midst of the ruins of Christian culture, in the midst of the broken images, we set up our own Buddhist images, which will, we hope, eventually take over and reconstruct the whole place.

One more thing and I have done. As I have said more than once, the journey to Il Convento is a journey that takes us from the world of sensuous desire, through the world of archetypal form, to the threshold of the transcendental. The real journey to Il Convento is therefore a journey that must be made not once but many times, each time at a higher level. So much, perhaps, has already been made clear. What also needs to be made clear is that it is possible to make the journey to Il Convento without coming to Il Convento in the literal sense at all. We can make it without leaving England, without seeing Italy, for since the journey to Il Convento is an inner journey it is a journey that we can make staying in our own house and sitting in our own room. As Lao Tzu says, 'Without looking out of the window, one can see the Way of Heaven.' But although this is true it is no more than half the truth, or even less than half. Man has not only an inner but an outer being; he consists not only of mind but also of speech and body. Consequently, if one really wants to make the journey to Il Convento - if one really wants to leave the world of sensuous desire, traverse the world of images or the imaginal world, and arrive at the threshold of the transcendental - then

one will want to do so in the most complete and total manner possible. One will not be content to 'go forth' metaphorically. One will want to 'go forth' literally too. Thus one's inner journey will be paralleled by an outer journey, and this outer journey will not necessarily be a journey from London or Glasgow to Il Convento. It may be a journey from Bombay to Bhaja, or from Manchester to Padmaloka. But wherever it begins and wherever it ends it will be a journey to a place where one can be ordained, a place where one can go for Refuge to the Three Jewels with body, speech, and mind.

Yet even though one's outer journey does not necessarily take one to Il Convento, there is no doubt that at the present juncture in the history of the FWBO those who are in a position to make the journey to Il Convento in the literal sense are particularly fortunate. I am therefore glad that this year fifteen of you have been able to make that journey for the first time, and to make it in the hope, now about to be fulfilled, of being ordained here. I hope that you will be able to make the real journey to Il Convento many, many times. I hope that each time you make the journey you will be able to make a more decisive break with the world of sensuous desire. I hope that each time you make it you will be able to explore the world of images at ever higher and more refined levels. Above all, I hope that as you truly arrive at the threshold of the transcendental your Going for Refuge will be transformed into a transcendental Going for Refuge. When that happens, the purpose of the whole journey to Il Convento will be fulfilled.