

Lecture 165: The Glory of the Literary World - Edited Version

IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT THE RENAISSANCE that would be brought about by the discovery, in the nineteenth century, of the treasures of oriental literature, would be incomparably more glorious than that which had been ushered in during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by the recovery of the classics of Greece and Rome. Whether that prediction will be fulfilled it is difficult for us, in the middle of the penultimate decade of the twentieth century, to be sure, but we can at least be sure that there is a possibility of its being fulfilled. The treasures of oriental literature have indeed been discovered, that is, discovered by the peoples of the West, and have proved to be even richer than was originally supposed. Not only have they been discovered, but many of them have been made more generally available by being translated into the major occidental languages, especially English. Thus today, less than two hundred years after the discovery of those same treasures, we find that hundreds of thousands - perhaps millions - of people in Europe and the Americas are able to read, in their own tongue, some of the greatest works of Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, and Persian literature. What people read cannot but affect them, and what affects hundreds of thousands - perhaps millions - of people cannot but affect the civilization and culture to which they belong, at least in course of time. We may therefore say that the second, more glorious renaissance that, it was predicted, would be brought about by the discovery of the treasures of oriental literature, has in a sense already begun, even though it has begun on a very small scale, and to a very limited extent, and though we cannot be sure whether the process will ever be completed.

There are, of course, differences between the two renaissances. The first was ushered in by the recovery of the classics of Greece and Rome, whereas the second hopefully is being brought about by the discovery of the classics of India, China, Japan, Tibet, and Persia. Moreover, in the case of the first renaissance the Greek and Roman classics were in most instances recovered from the hands of a people (i.e. the Byzantine Greeks) whose religion - and culture too, to a great extent - was quite different from that of the authors of those classics, whereas in the case of the second renaissance the treasures of oriental literature have in almost all instances been discovered among people whose spiritual outlook was broadly identical with that of the ancient poets and sages by whom that literature had been produced. This latter circumstance has meant that the discovery of the treasures of oriental literature has been associated with the discovery of those who were, so to speak, the natural heirs to those treasures and who were therefore in a position to help us appreciate their value and significance. When the Italian humanists recovered the Dialogues of Plato, for example, they did not recover any living Platonists along with them; but when British orientalists discovered the Bhagavad Gita they at the same time discovered many learned and pious Hindus who had studied and practised its teachings. In other words, whereas the humanists recovered books the orientalists discovered both books and men, that is, men who were the living representatives of the tradition to which the books belonged. Another difference between the two renaissances is that the actual number of Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, and Persian classics discovered in the course of the last two hundred years far exceeds the number of Greek and Roman classics recovered during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries.

In view of all these differences it is obvious that if the second renaissance succeeds in coming to maturity it will be not only more glorious but more thoroughgoing and more far-reaching in its effects than the first. Indeed, it will be more glorious precisely because it is more thoroughgoing and more far-reaching in its effects. However, it is not with the vast subject of the two renaissances that I propose to deal on the present occasion. I do not even propose to deal with one of them separately. My purpose is much more modest. All I propose to do is to offer a few more or less random remarks on one particular aspect of the renaissance that has been brought about by the discovery of the treasures of oriental literature - a renaissance in the midst of whose very tentative beginnings we are all, to some extent, now living.

As I have already indicated, the treasures of oriental literature are to be found in Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, and Persian. These are the six principal languages involved. If we look at the corresponding literatures, however, we shall see that, taken in their respective totalities, Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan literature all have much more in common with each other than any of them has with Persian literature. These five literatures thus form a kind of natural group. If we look again, we shall see that what the five literatures have in common is the fact that they are all, to a greater or lesser extent, Buddhist literatures. Indeed, in a number of cases a work that is a classic of Buddhist literature in one language is also a classic of Buddhist literature in another language, into which it has been translated. This is particularly the case with Sanskrit Buddhist literature, on the one hand, and Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist literature on the other. In England we are not unfamiliar with the phenomenon, the Authorized Version of the Book of Job and Fitzgerald's translation of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, for example, being as much classics of English literature as the original works are classics of Hebrew and of Persian literature.

The most important part of that part of Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan literature which is also Buddhist literature is what is traditionally known as the Tripitaka or 'Three Collections' (literally 'baskets') of the Buddha's teachings, that is, the Sutra Pitaka or Collection of Discourses, the Vinaya Pitaka or Collection of Monastic Discipline, and the Abhidharma Pitaka or Collection of Further Doctrine. In Tibet and its cultural dependencies the Tibetan version of the Tripitaka is known as the Kangyur or '[Translated] Word of the Buddha'. This designation draws attention to the fact that the contents of the Tripitaka are traditionally regarded as Buddhavacana, the word or utterance of the Enlightened One. Buddhist literature, whether in Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, Japanese, or Tibetan, thus falls into two great divisions, one consisting of works composed by the Buddha's disciples, immediate or remote, the other consisting of works purporting to embody the Buddhavacana, either in its original form or in translation. It is this latter group of works that comprises what I have termed Buddhist canonical literature, by 'canonical' meaning that the literature in question is traditionally regarded as Buddhavacana. Besides being the most important part of Buddhist literature, this Buddhist canonical literature is probably the most valuable of all the many treasures of oriental literature that have so far been discovered. Such being the case it is to be expected that it will make an especially significant contribution to the second, more glorious renaissance that the discovery of those treasures hopefully is bringing about, and it is on the subject of Buddhist canonical literature that I therefore propose to offer a few remarks on this occasion.

In offering these remarks on this particular aspect of the second renaissance, as I have called it, I shall not be trying to give you a resume of *The Eternal Legacy*, useful as that might be. I shall not even be trying to determine the exact nature of the contribution that Buddhist canonical literature is likely to make to the second renaissance. Instead, I shall be seeking to share with you a few reflections on Buddhist canonical literature as literature.

Before I can do this, however, it will be necessary for me to deal with a possible objection. We know that the Buddha himself wrote nothing. We know that he taught orally, and that before being written down around the beginning of the Common Era his teachings were preserved entirely by oral means. But the word literature means 'writing'. If the canonical literature consists of works purporting to embody the Buddhavacana, therefore, is it not a contradiction in terms to speak of Buddhist canonical literature? The objection is more apparent than real. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are universally regarded as works of classical Greek literature: indeed, they are regarded as its greatest works; but there is no doubt that both epics existed as oral compositions for centuries before they were committed to writing in the sixth century BCE. From this it is obvious that literature, which a modern dictionary defines as 'written material such as poetry, novels, essays, etc.' and as 'the body of written work of a particular culture or people', includes both material that was written down at the time of composition and material that was written down subsequently, after it had been preserved by oral means for a longer or a shorter period. No contradiction in terms is therefore involved in speaking of Buddhist canonical literature.

What, then, do I mean when I speak of sharing with you a few reflections on Buddhist canonical literature as literature? What sort of difference of attitude does such an emphasis imply? In any case, what is literature, in the real as distinct from the merely formal sense of the term, and in what other way or ways could one approach Buddhist canonical literature if one does not approach it as literature? In discussing these questions I shall, in fact, be doing what I proposed to do and sharing with you my reflections on Buddhist canonical literature as literature, so that when the discussion is complete I shall have little more to say on the subject, at least for the present.

Let me begin with a few definitions, that is, definitions of literature, since it is on the question of the real nature of literature that the whole discussion hinges. These definitions will enable us to see to what extent we are justified in approaching Buddhist canonical literature as literature. According to Carlyle, literature is 'the thought of thinking Souls'. There is no doubt that the great being who was so deeply moved by the sight of an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a wandering ascetic that he left home in quest of Supreme Enlightenment was a 'thinking Soul' in the fullest sense of the term, and no doubt that the Buddhist canonical literature - the Buddhavacana - contains what we may well describe as the Buddha's thought - especially if, with D.H. Lawrence, we understand by thought not just the manipulation of abstract ideas but 'a man in his wholeness wholly attending'. The next definition does not bear quite so directly on the present discussion, but it is of considerable general interest. 'Literature, taken in all its bearings', says William Godwin, the author of *Political Justice*, 'forms the grand line of demarcation between the human and the animal kingdoms.' One is reminded here of the fact that in Tibetan representations of the Wheel of Life the blue Buddha is depicted showing the inhabitants of the animal world a book. The book stands for literature. It is the possession of literature, rather than the possession of language, that distinguishes man from the animals, for even though it may be argued that animals can, in fact, speak (as distinct from making inarticulate noises), it can hardly be argued that they can write books. Moreover, if it is literature that forms the line of demarcation between man and animals that line will be formed most definitively by

that literature which, in the terms of the previous definition, is the thought of the most deeply thinking Soul. This would appear to suggest that inasmuch as the Buddha is traditionally regarded as the deepest thinking Soul known to history Buddhist canonical literature is not only literature but literature par excellence.

Though in certain respects very illuminating, both these definitions - Carlyle's and Godwin's - are at the same time rather narrow. A much more comprehensive definition is provided by the classical scholar J.W. Mackail, who writes 'Language put to its best purpose, used at its utmost power and with the greatest skill, and recorded that it may not pass away, evaporate, and be forgotten, is what we call, for want of a better word, literature.' This definition must be examined clause by clause. To begin with, literature is 'language put to its best purpose'. But what is the best purpose to which language can be put? From a Buddhist point of view the answer to this question is to be found in the exhortation with which the Buddha sent his first sixty disciples out into the world. 'Go ye now, monks,' he is reported as saying, 'and wander for the gain of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain, and for the welfare of gods and men.... Preach the Dhamma ...; proclaim a consummate, perfect, and pure life of holiness. There are beings whose mental eyes are covered by scarcely any dust, but if the Dhamma is not preached to them, they cannot attain salvation.'⁴⁸ In other words, the monks are to preach - are to make use of language - in order that beings endowed with awareness may be enabled to live the holy life (brahmacariya) and attain salvation, and they are to do this out of compassion. Thus the best purpose to which language can be put is to communicate salvific truth (dhamma). Buddhist canonical literature contains this salvific truth. Hence Buddhist canonical literature is literature in the most real sense of the term.

Next, literature is 'language used at its utmost power and with the greatest skill'. There is no doubt that in communicating the salvific truth the Buddha stretched the language that was available to him to the utmost limits of its capacity. There are, indeed, those who maintain that Middle Indic was in fact insufficient for his purposes, much as the English language 'sunk under' Milton. Thus Buddhist canonical literature is literature in this sense too. Finally, literature is 'language recorded that it may not pass away, evaporate, and be forgotten'. That Buddhist canonical literature is literature in this sense is obvious. After being preserved entirely by oral means for nearly half a millennium, the salvific truth communicated by the Buddha was committed to writing for the benefit of future generations. In the case of the Pali Tipitaka - the Theravada version of the Buddhavacana - this took place in Sri Lanka towards the end of the first century BCE. 'The text of the three Pitakas and the atthakatha thereon did the most wise bhikkhus hand down in former times orally,' says the Mahavamsa or 'Great Chronicle' of Sri Lanka, 'but since they saw that the people were falling away (from religion) the bhikkhus came together, and in order that the true doctrine [saddhamma] might endure, they wrote them down in books.'⁴⁹ Whether by oral or literary means, the preservation of the Buddhavacana has indeed been ever regarded as the special responsibility of the Monastic Order.

This more comprehensive definition not only gives us a better understanding of the real nature of literature, not only helps us to see to what extent we are justified in approaching Buddhist canonical literature as literature; it also suggests that Buddhist canonical literature is, in fact, literature 'writ large', in the sense that by approaching Buddhist canonical literature as literature we in fact endow the concept of literature with a fuller and richer content than it possessed before. It is therefore interesting to note that Mackail concludes by saying of language 'put to the best purpose' and so on that it is 'what we call, for want of a better word, literature.' For want of a better word! It is almost as though he felt that the phenomenon he had so carefully defined so far transcended what was ordinarily understood by the term literature that a more appropriate word was really needed. Might one suggest that that more appropriate word would be one that was reminiscent of the term Buddhavacana or, if that was considered as representing too high an ideal for the phenomenon in question, one that was reminiscent of what the poet-monk Vangisa, in verses addressed to the Buddha, spoke of as 'deathless speech (amata vaca)' - that deathless speech which is, at the same time 'truth (sacca)'?⁵⁰

Nowadays we are not accustomed to thinking of literature in this kind of way. We are not even accustomed to thinking of poetry in this kind of way. Though once defined as 'the record of the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds', poetry seems to have become, in the hands of some recent practitioners of the art, the record of the worst and most depressing moments of the worst and most deeply disturbed minds. In other words literature - including poetry - nowadays tends to be 'clinical': it is a record of symptoms - of symptoms of disease. So much is this the case that we often find it difficult to think of literature, and indeed the arts in general, in any other way. We find it difficult to think of literature in terms of Mackail's definition, especially when this is commented on from a Buddhist point of view, and still more difficult to understand what is meant by that fuller and richer content with which, it is claimed, the concept of literature becomes endowed when we approach Buddhist canonical literature as literature. Let

me therefore read you a section from Lu Chi's rhyme-prose Essay on Literature. I had intended to read this a little later on, when the definitions of literature had all been dealt with, but perhaps I had better read it now and deal with the two remaining definitions afterwards. Lu Chi was a Chinese writer who lived from 261 to 303CE. His essay is in eleven sections, and I am going to read the fourth section, entitled 'The Joy of Writing'. Since writing here means nothing less than the creation of literature, what Lu Chi has to say about the joy of writing will at the same time show us in what kind of way he thinks of literature.

Writing is in itself a joy, Yet saints and sages have long since held it in awe. For it is Being, created by tasking the Great Void, And 'tis sound rung out of Profound Silence. In a sheet of paper is contained the Infinite, And, evolved from an inch-sized heart, an endless panorama. The words, as they expand, become all-evocative, The thought, still further pursued, will run the deeper, Till flowers in full blossom exhale all-pervading fragrance, And tender boughs, their saps running, grow to a whole jungle of splendour. Bright winds spread luminous wings, quick breezes soar from the earth, And, nimbus-like amidst all these, rises the glory of the literary world.⁵¹

Writing is 'Being, created by tasking the Great Void'. It is hardly necessary for me to tell you that nowadays we do not usually think of writing in this kind of way, and perhaps not everybody did even in fourth and fifth century China. Lu Chi's conception of the writer, especially the poet, and of the use of literature, is on a level with his conception of writing. The first section of his essay, entitled 'The Motive', opens with the ringing declaration:

Erect in the Central Realm the poet views the expanse of the whole universe, And in tomes of ancient wisdom his spirit rejoices and finds nurture.⁵²

'The poet views the expanse of the whole universe.' This is surely reminiscent of Plato's famous definition of the philosopher as 'the spectator of all time and all existence', though it will be noticed that the poet's spirit rejoices and finds nurture in 'tomes of ancient wisdom'. Thus the poet is not simply an untutored child of nature. He is also deeply versed in traditional philosophy. As for Lu Chi's conception of the use of literature, this is the subject of the concluding section of his essay. I was going to read only the first two lines, but it is so important and so evocative that I think I had better read it all:

The use of literature Lies in its conveyance of every truth. It expands the horizon to make space infinite, And serves as a bridge that spans a myriad years. It maps all roads and paths for posterity, And mirrors the images of worthy ancients, That the tottering Edifices of the sage kings of antiquity may be reared

again, And their admonishing voices, wind-borne since of yore, may resume full

expression. No regions are too remote but it pervades, No truth too subtle to be woven into its vast web. Like mist and rain, it permeates and nourishes, And manifests all the powers of transformation in which gods and spirits

share. Virtue it makes endure and radiate on brass and stone, And resound in an eternal stream of melodies ever renewed on pipes and

strings.⁵³

No doubt there is much that could be said on the conception of literature that emerges from these quotations from Lu Chi's remarkable essay, but any commentary must be reserved for some future occasion. For the present I am concerned with the section entitled 'The Joy of Writing', and the two other passages I have read, only to the extent that they give us a general idea of what is actually meant by the concept of literature having a 'fuller and richer' content. In Lu Chi's own words, I am concerned with them only to the extent that they give us a glimpse of 'the glory of the literary world'. Let me, then, now proceed straight to the two remaining definitions.

The first of these will not detain us long, since it has much in common with Mackail's definition, though expressed with a succinctness that makes it particularly memorable. 'Great literature', says Ezra Pound, 'is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.' Here the distinction between oral and recorded literature seems to be ignored - perhaps because Pound considered it unimportant. Unlike Carlyle, Godwin, and Mackail he does, however, distinguish (at least by implication) between what is great literature and what is not great literature, the latter presumably being language that is charged with meaning only to a moderate degree.

Our last definition of literature is concerned with the relation between the spoken and the written word. According to Robert Louis Stevenson 'Literature in many of its branches is no more than the shadow of good talk.' The operative word here is 'shadow'. Good and even great as literature may be, in many of its branches it is to good talk as the shadow to the substance. What makes the written record of an oral communication so much more 'shadowy', in some instances, than the oral communication itself, is the fact that in oral communication the language of words is supplemented by the language of gestures, of facial expression, of intonation, and in short by the total impact of the personality of the speaker on his auditor. This is certainly the case with the Buddhist canonical literature, which indeed is no more than the shadow of the Buddha's 'good talk'. ('Good talk' could, in fact, be regarded as the English equivalent of dhamma-katha, usually translated as 'pious talk'.) What the Buddha communicated by virtue of the impact of his Enlightened personality on the unenlightened personalities of his disciples far outweighed what he was able to communicate to them simply by means of words. The Buddhist canonical literature, however, contains only the words. In reading that literature, therefore, we should never forget that although the Buddha stretched Middle Indic to the utmost limits of its capacity he was still far from being able to communicate his 'Vision of Truth' in its fullness by purely verbal means. Buddhist canonical literature thus partakes of the same limitations as all literature, including even poetry. Though much is conveyed, there is much that is not - indeed cannot be - conveyed by words. Speaking of his experience not of truth but of beauty, Marlowe's Tamburlaine gives magnificent expression to this fact in lines that I have already quoted in *The Eternal Legacy* and which I make no apology for quoting again.

If all the pens that ever poets held
Had fed the feeling of their masters' thoughts,
And every sweetness that inspired
their hearts, Their minds, and muses on admired themes;
If all the heavenly quintessence they still
From their immortal flowers of poesy,
Wherein, as in a mirror, we perceive
The highest reaches of a human wit;
If these had made one poem's period,
And all combin'd in beauty's worthiness,
Yet should there hover in their restless heads
One thought, one grace, one wonder, at the least,
Which into words no virtue can digest.⁵⁴

It is because language - and therefore literature - is unable to communicate experience in its fullness that the Buddha declared in the *Lan.kavatara Sutra* that from the night of his Supreme Enlightenment to the night of his Final Passing Away he had not uttered a single word.⁵⁵ He had not uttered a single word because he had been unable to give full expression to his profound inner experience - in a sense, had not been able to give expression to it at all. Words alone, therefore, cannot reveal the secret of the Buddha's teaching. In order truly to understand that teaching we have to rely not merely on words but on the spirit (artha) as opposed to the letter (vyanjana) of the Dharma. As some of you will know, this is one of the four reliances (pratisarana) of the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa* and other texts. However, I digress. It is time we got back into the main track of the discussion.

The real nature of literature having transpired from the definitions provided by Carlyle, Godwin, Mackail, Pound, and Stevenson, particularly as commented on from a Buddhist point of view, it is clear that we are fully justified in approaching Buddhist canonical literature as literature. Indeed, it is clear that in approaching Buddhist canonical literature in this way we in fact endow the concept of literature with a fuller and richer meaning than it possessed before, at least in recent times. What, then, does it actually mean, in practical terms, to approach Buddhist canonical literature as literature? Let me take as my point of departure a similar kind of approach to the canonical literature of another religion, as encountered by me in my own early life.

In 1940 I was in Torquay. It was the time when, as a result of reading *Isis Unveiled*, I had realized I was not a Christian. One day, in the window of a bookshop in the main street, I saw a new publication on sale. The publication in question was *The Bible Designed to be Read as Literature*. It was a large, thick volume, and since it lay there open I could see that it was printed like an ordinary book, the text not being divided into the usual numbered verses. At that time the idea that the Bible could be read as literature was comparatively new, at least to the wider reading public. It was certainly new to me. From school and church I had imbibed the idea that the Bible was essentially a repository of texts. Texts lay side by side in the Bible like bullets in a bandolier, and these bullets could be fired off at anyone with whom one happened to be having an argument, whether about religion or about anything else. To quote a text - or texts - from the Bible settled the matter. This kind of attitude still prevails, of course, among fundamentalist Christians of all denominations. Reading the Bible as literature meant, so far as I remember, reading it in much the same way as one would read the works of Shakespeare, and the layout of the volume that I saw in the window of my Torquay bookshop was intended to facilitate this process. It was intended to encourage one to think of the Bible as a book rather than as a collection of bullets, and to approach it accordingly. Thus *The Bible Designed to be Read as Literature* was the Bible designed to be read for enjoyment. It was the Bible designed to be read as a whole - or rather as a series of wholes - rather than as chopped up into bits in the form of numbered 'verses'. It was the Bible designed to be read,

in the case of some of its books, as poetry rather than as prose. It was the Bible designed to be read for its own sake rather than for the sake of some ulterior purpose. To the fundamentalist, reading the Bible in this way was irreverent, even blasphemous. How could one possibly read the Bible as one read the works of Shakespeare? The Bible was the Word of God. How could one possibly compare profane literature, however great, with literature that had been inspired, even dictated, by the Holy Spirit?

At this point I had intended to read you the section on 'The Joy of Writing' from Lu Chi's Essay on Literature, which shows that the difference between so-called profane literature, on the one hand, and canonical literature or 'scripture', on the other, is far less than the Christian fundamentalist, at least, supposes. Since I have read that section already, as well as other passages from the same work, let me pass from The Bible Designed to be Read as Literature to the question of what it actually means, in practical terms, to approach Buddhist canonical literature as literature, without further delay, taking 'The Joy of Writing' as having been read at this point.

In Buddhism there is, of course, no such thing as fundamentalism in the full-blown Christian sense. Buddhists have never chopped up the Buddhist canonical literature into bits and used the bits as bullets in the way Christians have done. Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that in some Buddhist circles there exists a sort of quasi-fundamentalism that could, if it were allowed to develop, be as much of a hindrance to our approaching Buddhist canonical literature as literature as Christian fundamentalism is to the appreciation of The Bible Designed to be Read as Literature. This quasi-fundamentalism takes the form of appealing to the authority of the canonical literature in support of a particular belief or practice but only in a general way, i.e. without actually citing any individual text or texts. An appeal of this sort is usually couched in such language as 'the Buddha says', or 'according to the Tipitaka', or 'it is stated in all the Sutras and Tantras'. This quasi-fundamentalism is strengthened by the fact that in many parts of the Buddhist world the beautifully written and richly bound volumes of the canonical literature are often ceremonially worshipped rather than read - even in the case of those very bhikkhus and lamas who appeal to their authority in this manner. This is not to say that there is anything wrong in making the volumes of the Buddhist canonical literature an object of ceremonial worship. Such is far from being the case. But ceremonial worship of the volumes of the Buddhist canonical literature is no substitute for the actual reading of that literature. Unless we read the canonical literature we cannot understand and practise the Buddha's teaching and - what is of particular relevance to the present discussion - unless we read the canonical literature there can be no question of our approaching it as literature.

Even the quasi-fundamentalism that exists in some Buddhist circles is not easy to eradicate, however. Indeed, it may be said that despite the fact that in Buddhism there is no such thing as fundamentalism in the full-blown Christian sense, the possibility of fundamentalism exists wherever a canonical literature exists, irrespective of whether that literature is regarded as the Word of God or as the written record of the utterance of a supremely Enlightened human teacher. Such being the case, it should be possible for us to apply the same general principles that were responsible for the appearance of the large, thick volume of The Bible Designed to be Read as Literature in the window of that Torquay bookshop forty-five years ago to the Buddhist canonical literature. More than that. It should be possible for us to utilize my explanation of what The Bible Designed to be Read as Literature was, in fact, designed to be read for, in such a way as to enable us to understand what it actually means, in practical terms, to approach Buddhist canonical literature as literature. Thus, to approach Buddhist canonical literature as literature means, in the first place, reading the canonical literature for enjoyment. This does not mean reading it for the sake of amusement, or simply to while away the time. Reading the canonical literature for enjoyment means reading it because, in so doing, we find ourselves immersed in an emotionally positive state of being such as - outside meditation - we hardly ever experience. Reading the canonical literature for enjoyment means reading it without any sense of compulsion. We do not have to read it. Whether as represented by the Dhammapada or the White Lotus Sutra, the Middle Length Sayings or the Perfection of Wisdom 'in Eight Thousand Lines', the Buddhist canonical literature is not a sort of prescribed text on which we are going to be examined at the end of the year and rewarded or punished in accordance with how well - or how badly - we have done. Reading the canonical literature for enjoyment means reading it because we want to read it. It means reading it because we have an affinity for it, and are drawn to it naturally and spontaneously. Having said this, however, I must add that I always find it a little strange when someone who professes to be a committed Buddhist does not read at least some parts of the canonical literature for enjoyment, especially if he or she enjoys reading other kinds of literature.

To approach the Buddhist canonical literature as literature also means reading it as a whole. This does not mean reading the whole of that literature (it is in any case fifty times more extensive than the Bible) but rather reading this or that item of canonical literature as a whole. Reading the Sutta-nipata, or the Vimalakirti-nirdesa, for example, in this manner, means reading it not piecemeal, not concentrating on the parts at the expense of the whole, but reading it in such a way as to allow oneself to experience its total

impact. Only if we read it in this kind of way will we be able to grasp the fundamental significance of the work or, if one likes, its gestalt. This is particularly the case, perhaps, where the work in question possesses a definite artistic unity and where it has been cast in poetic form. In the latter case, to approach the Buddhist canonical literature as literature means, of course, reading it as poetry. It was one of the special features of *The Bible Designed to be Read as Literature* that it printed the poetical books of the Old Testament as poetry, which gave them a rather Whitmanesque appearance, instead of chopping them up into numbered bits as though they were prose. (Not that even prose should really be treated in this way.) In the case of Buddhist canonical literature there is no danger of works, or parts of works, that are in poetic form being chopped up into numbered bits - at least, not when they are printed in the original. The danger is that when they are translated into a modern language they will be translated not into poetry but into prose and read accordingly. I shall be returning to this point later on.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, to approach the Buddhist canonical literature as literature means to read it for its own sake rather than for the sake of some ulterior purpose. The ulterior purposes for the sake of which it is possible to read the canonical literature are very numerous. I shall mention only a few of them, leaving you to think of the rest for yourselves. Buddhist canonical literature can be read simply for the sake of the languages in which it has come down to us, that is, it can be read with a view to furthering our knowledge of linguistics. Similarly, it can be read for the sake of the light it sheds (particularly in the case of the Agamas/Nikayas and the Vinaya-Pitaka) on the political, social, economic, and religious condition of India at the time of the Buddha and his immediate disciples. Buddhist canonical literature can also be read for the sake of its contribution to comparative religion and mythology and to the intellectual history of mankind. It can even be read for the purpose of refuting Buddhism, as when a Christian missionary reads it before going off to work in a Buddhist country. With the possible exception of the last, there is nothing actually wrong in reading the Buddhist canonical literature for the sake of any of these purposes. But the fact remains that they are all ulterior purposes - ulterior, that is, to the purpose that the Buddhist canonical literature itself exists to subserve and for the sake of which, therefore, it should really be read.

The purpose that the Buddhist canonical literature exists to subserve is the happiness and welfare - the highest happiness and highest welfare - of all sentient beings, and we read that literature for its own sake when we read it with this in mind. The Buddhist canonical literature is, after all, the Buddhavacana, the word or utterance of the Enlightened One. It is a communication from the heart and mind of an Enlightened human being to the hearts and minds of those who are as yet unenlightened. It is a communication from the Buddha to ourselves. Reading the canonical literature for its own sake therefore means reading it in order to listen to what the Buddha has to say to us - which means listening seriously. Indeed, we cannot really listen in any other kind of way. Some of you know that I have more than once said of the poets - especially the great poets - that far from merely indulging in flowery language they in fact mean exactly what they say, and that they are trying to communicate to us something which they think worth communicating. How much more so is this the case with the Buddha, and how much more seriously, therefore, ought we to listen to the words of the Buddhavacana! How much more seriously ought we to read the Buddhist canonical literature!

This, then, is what it actually means, in practical terms, to approach the Buddhist canonical literature as literature. It means reading the Buddhist canonical literature for enjoyment, reading it as a whole, reading it - wherever appropriate - as poetry rather than as prose, and reading it for its own sake rather than for the sake of some ulterior purpose. But before bringing these reflections of mine to a close I would like to make it clear that when I speak of approaching Buddhist canonical literature as literature I do not mean to imply that that literature is all equally literature, or all literature in the same sense of the term. A distinction made by De Quincey will be useful here. According to De Quincey, there are two kinds of literature. 'There is first the literature of knowledge, and secondly, the literature of power. The function of the former is - to teach; the function of the second is - to move; the first is a rudder, the second an oar or a sail. The first speaks to the mere discursive understanding; the second speaks ultimately, it may happen, to the higher understanding of reason.' In another place De Quincey goes so far as to suggest that the literature of knowledge is not really literature at all. 'All that is literature seeks to communicate power: all that is not literature seeks to communicate knowledge.' In the last analysis the difference between the two kinds of literature, or two kinds of communication, would seem to be one of degree rather than one of kind. Literature is not all equally literature, nor all literature in the same sense of the term, in that some works of literature communicate more power - and therefore move us more - than do others. In the case of the Bible, the Book of Job moves us more than the Book of Leviticus, even though the Book of Leviticus contains a great deal more information about the ancient Jewish sacrificial system. Thus the Book of Job belongs to the literature of power. It is literature proper. It is 'great literature'.

Applying this to the Buddhist canonical literature, we may say that the Maha-parinibba-na Sutta moves us more than does the Dhatu-katha (I am taking extreme examples to make the distinction clear), the Vimalakirti-nirdesa more than the Suvikrantivikrami-paripriccha, and the 'Confession' chapter of the Suvarna-prabhasha Sutra more than the 'S'unyata' chapter of the same work. Thus the Maha-parinibba-na Sutta, the Vimalakirti-nirdesa, and the 'Confession' chapter of the Suvarna-prabhasha Sutra all belong to the literature of power, while the Dhatu-katha, the Suvikrantivikrami-paripriccha, and the 'S'unyata' chapter of the Suvarna-prabhasha Sutra all belong to the literature of knowledge. Since it is the literature of power that constitutes literature in the real sense, or great literature, reading the Buddhist canonical literature as literature therefore means reading such works as the Maha-parinibba-na Sutta rather than such works as the Dhatu-katha. Indeed, we might even go so far as to say that just as literature is not all equally literature so canonical literature is not all equally canonical literature, and that it is the more truly canonical the more deeply it moves us. This is not to say that, from the Buddhist point of view, there is a real distinction between teaching, which according to De Quincey is the function of the literature of knowledge, and moving, which according to De Quincey is the function of the literature of power. From the point of view of Buddhism, the Buddha teaches by moving, because his 'teaching' is addressed not to what De Quincey calls 'the mere discursive understanding' or what we might call the alienated intellect, but rather to what De Quincey calls 'the higher understanding of reason' or what we might call the heart, in the sense of the deepest part of our being, or the spiritual intuition, or the whole man. Reading the Buddhist canonical literature as literature therefore means reading it as the literature of power and allowing ourselves to be moved by that power to the fullest possible extent.

One last point. I have said that when works, or parts of works, of Buddhist canonical literature that are in poetry are translated into a modern language there is the danger that they will be translated into prose and read accordingly. The danger consists in the fact that poetry is the literature of power par excellence, which is the reason why poetry is capable of moving us to a far greater extent than prose, so that when poetry is translated into prose it loses much of its original power and, therefore, much of its capacity to move. In reading works of Buddhist canonical literature in translation we should be careful to read them, wherever possible, in translations which do justice to their poetic quality. Otherwise we shall be unable to read them as literature in the fullest sense and thus will not be moved by them to the extent that we might have been.

If we are able, however, to read poetry as poetry, if we are able to understand the real nature of literature, if we are able to see to what extent we are justified in approaching Buddhist canonical literature as literature, and able to see what it actually means, in practical terms, to approach it in this way, if we allow ourselves to feel the power of works like the Maha-parinibba-na Sutta and the Vimalakirti-nirdesa, then we shall obtain at least a glimpse of the glory of the literary world, and gain a better understanding of the real nature of Buddhist canonical literature.