

## Lecture 179: Wisdom Beyond Words

Saddhaloka and friends

Last year, as I expect all of you remember, we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. And this year we've been celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Western Buddhist Order itself. And of course 25 years is quite a long time, but of course it isn't really a very long time in the context of the history of Buddhism itself. The history of Buddhism goes back not just 25 years but 25 centuries. But in the context of the average human life, in the context of our three score years and ten, twenty five years is quite a sizeable slice.

Of course, when we started the FWBO, when we started our meetings, when we started our meditation classes, in that now historic, not to say mythic, basement in Monmouth Street, in what most chroniclers of our movement describe as the West End of London, but is actually in central London, in fact east central London, at that time there were people who thought that the FWBO was not going to last very long. Some of them thought, and some of them even said, that well, here is Sangharakshita. He's spent twenty years in India, and quite out of touch with things here in Britain. He's come back. He's got these few enthusiastic youngsters around him, mostly sort of hippies, and they've started this new Buddhist movement, but it's not going to last very long. It's going to peter out after a while. It's just going to disappear, it's just going to fade away and be perhaps just a little footnote in the history of - well, I won't say the history of what, but in the history of something else.

In fact I might even go so far as to say there were a few people at least who were rather hoping that the FWBO wouldn't last, because they didn't quite like the look and the sound of it. Not that they necessarily had any personal experience of it, but from what they heard, from what they gathered, they weren't really quite sure that it was a really worthwhile addition to the British Buddhist scene. But the FWBO has in fact lasted. It's lasted 25, 26 years. And it's not only lasted, it's not just survived; it's grown, it's developed, it's expanded, one might even say proliferated, in a way that nobody, whether friends or those who were not so friendly, could possibly have imagined in those early days. We have now, I believe, regular permanent activities and centres in at least thirteen different countries. I need hardly detail to you what we do have now.

So the question that arises, the question that we have to ask ourselves, and which perhaps people outside the FWBO also ask sometimes: why is it that the FWBO has lasted? I can remember in those early days - the sixties, seventies - all sorts of religious groups, movements, started up, and I'm sure most of you haven't even heard the names of those movements which did in fact fade away. So why didn't we fade away? Why have we lasted?

Well, I suppose we could say in just a few words that we've lasted, the FWBO has lasted, because it has a strong foundation. And that foundation is of course, as we all know very well, our common Going for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. But more than that, the edifice of the FWBO doesn't just have a strong foundation. It also has pillars, it also has supporting pillars. It's supported by five mighty pillars, and it's on account of those pillars, as well as on account of its foundations, that it's lasted. It's supported by what I've called the five pillars of the FWBO. No doubt quite a few of you will recall that on the occasion of the 23rd anniversary of the FWBO I spoke about these five pillars at some length.

So what are these five pillars? First of all there's the pillar of ideas. And then there's the pillar of practices, especially meditation practices, with which in fact we started our movement. Thirdly there's the pillar of institutions - institutions like our public centres, our residential spiritual communities, our team-based Right Livelihood businesses, our spiritual friendships. These are all institutions. And then there's the pillar of experiment. We recognize that new situations may require new approaches, so that we have to experiment, have to find out which particular new approach may suit which particular situation. And finally, fifthly, there's the pillar of imagination, of vision, as embodied especially perhaps in myth, in symbol.

So these are the five pillars of the FWBO. And it's on account, very largely, of these pillars, as

well as on account of its foundation in our Going for Refuge, that the FWBO has lasted all these years. All these pillars are important. We can't manage, we can't do without a single one of them. But at the moment I'm concerned just with one pillar. I'm concerned with the pillar of ideas. And as I said two years ago in my talk, ideas in the broadest sense occupy a very important place in human life - individual human life, collective human life. Sometimes even ideas change history. They change the destinies of nations and of peoples. It's therefore not surprising that ideas should occupy an important place in Buddhism itself, in Buddhist teaching, in Buddhist tradition.

Some of these ideas of Buddhism will be familiar to you. Others will be not so familiar. Some of these ideas of Buddhism we may find, or some of us may find, easy to understand, but others we may find rather difficult, even very difficult to understand. And one of the ideas that at least some people have difficulty with is the idea of what I've come to call, what I've come to refer to, as the idea of spiritual hierarchy.

Now what is a hierarchy? So let's turn, as I very often do in the course of these lectures, to the dictionary, that most valuable of books. I was happening to read - this is just by the way - I was happening to read a Buddhist magazine just a few hours ago, and there was a report by a Buddhist lady in America who was teaching poetics, Buddhist poetics, and she said one of her students, a young man, said that if you wanted to write poetry, the first thing you did was to tear up your dictionary. And she said: No, young man. Don't tear up your dictionary. The dictionary is the most useful book that a poet could possibly have.' And I'm inclined to agree with that lady who was teaching Buddhist poetics. It's probably the most - well, next to the Buddhist scriptures themselves - probably the most valuable and useful book that any Buddhist could possess - especially of course the larger Oxford English dictionary, which is of course in 12 substantial volumes.

So next to the Bible and Shakespeare, or Shakespeare at least, a good dictionary would be my favourite desert island companion - preferably Johnson's dictionary of course. But anyway, let's take the help of the dictionary on this occasion. According to the dictionary a hierarchy is a system of persons or things arranged in a graded order. So this is helpful. But it doesn't go far enough. What is a 'graded' order? Well, a grade is a position or degree on a scale. And a system of persons or things is said to be arranged in a graded order when they are arranged according to their respective positions or degrees on a common scale. And of course there are many such scales, of many different kinds. There's a scale of size. There's a scale of weight - which some of us may get on to every morning. There's a scale of quantity, a scale of quality, and so on. And there's also a scale of, for want of a better term, spirit - spirit more in the sense of Hegel's geist than in the sense of the English word spirit.

A spiritual hierarchy is therefore a system of persons and/or states arranged according to their respective positions or degrees on the scale of spirit. Spirit, we may say, corresponds approximately to the Pali/Sanskrit citta, especially perhaps to kusala citta. In Buddhism there are many different hierarchies, in Buddhist teaching, in Buddhist tradition, in Buddhist art, Buddhist literature - many different hierarchies. Let me give just a few examples.

There's what we may describe as the cosmic hierarchy - that is to say, the hierarchy of the different levels or planes of 'objective' existence within the cosmos. First, beginning at the bottom, we have the plane of sensuous desire, the kamaloka. And then above that there's the plane of subtle or archetypal form, the rupaloka. And then, thirdly, there's the plane of no subtle or no archetypal form even, the formless plane, the arupaloka, as it's usually translated. These three planes are all planes of what we call conditioned existence - that is to say, existence which arises in dependence on conditions and ceases when those conditions cease. And above them, above the kamaloka, the rupaloka, the arupaloka - above them, so to speak, is the plane of the unconditioned - that is to say, the plane of that which neither arises nor ceases, the plane of that which is in a word eternal - eternal not indeed in the sense of having no beginning or ending in time, rather in the sense of transcending time altogether.

Then in Buddhism there's the hierarchy of beings within the cosmos, within this cosmos. At the bottom of this hierarchy we have beings in states of suffering, beings who can even be said to be

literally in hell. And right at the top we have just the opposite; we have the gods, enjoying states and conditions of bliss. And in between there are the hungry ghosts, the asuras or anti-gods, who are always fighting the gods, animals, and human beings. And these six kinds of beings are of course the beings occupying the six realms depicted in the Tibetan Wheel of Life, with which I'm sure practically everybody here is familiar.

So here in this hierarchy, the hierarchy of beings within the cosmos, there is a scale of happiness. The gods, at the top, enjoy the greatest happiness, human beings rather less, the asuras less still and so on, right down to the beings in states of suffering, the beings in hell, who enjoy no happiness at all, or very very little indeed. Sometimes this hierarchy of beings is understood as a hierarchy of power. And in that case the asuras are regarded as occupying a higher position than human beings, since although they are less happy than human beings, they are more powerful.

There's also a hierarchy of beauty. This hierarchy is illustrated by a well-known episode recounted in the Pali scriptures. The Buddha, as you know, had many disciples. Some were monks, some were, as it were, lay people. Some were old, some were young. And one of the Buddha's disciples was a monk, a young monk, called Sundarananda. Sundarananda left home, inspired by the Buddha's teaching; in fact he followed the Buddha into the forest. But though he had become a monk, though he had left home, though he'd followed the Buddha into the forest, he was still very attached to his former wife, who he married just a short while before going forth as a monk. His wife, we are told, was very beautiful, so it wasn't very surprising that Sundarananda, even though he'd become a monk, was still very much attached to her, and was in fact, we are told, always thinking of her. So there he was with the Buddha in the forest, sitting under a tree trying to meditate. But he just couldn't. His thoughts were always going back - back home, back to his beautiful wife, wondering 'What is she doing? With whom is she talking? Does she miss me? Is she thinking about me?'

So Sundarananda was in rather a state. Things were coming up, you know, for Sundarananda. Human nature is the same, you know, all over the world, in all the centuries. So what did the Buddha do? Obviously the Buddha had to do something about it. The Buddha had to take action, maybe even drastic action. So the Buddha did take drastic action. He exerted one of his supernormal powers - powers which even the chairmen of FWBO centres don't possess. By his supernormal power the Buddha immediately, in a twinkling of an eye, he'd transported Sundarananda up into a higher heavenly world. And he showed him the inhabitants of that higher heavenly world. And among the inhabitants there were five hundred beautiful goddesses. And these goddesses were infinitely more beautiful than any human female. We're told that they were pink-footed, they were dove-footed. Because, you know, in India at least, doves, little white doves have pretty pink feet. And in India in ancient times, as well as in modern times, the ladies paint their feet pink, so that they look like little white doves, or big white doves.

So here in this higher heavenly world there were these five hundred dazzlingly beautiful goddesses, infinitely more beautiful than any human female, and all with pink feet. So when Sundarananda saw them, he was absolutely overwhelmed by this beautiful sight. And he at once lost all attachment to his wife. In fact, when he thought of his wife, she seemed in comparison with these five hundred goddesses with pink feet, she seemed positively ugly. And according to the text Sundarananda gave expression to his sense of the difference between them in a manner that might be considered rather ungallant. I won't tell you what he said.

So here we have a hierarchy of beauty: the lower earthly beauty, the higher heavenly beauty, and all the intermediate grades of beauty in between. And we find this hierarchy of beauty not only in the Buddha's teaching in the Pali canon. We find it exemplified not only in the Buddha's teaching in the Pali canon, but this conception of the hierarchy of beauty occupies a very important place in the teachings of Plato. You know, some of you at least have read Plato's Symposium, and the hierarchy of beauty is there. It features also in the somewhat later teachings of that great follower and disciple of Plato, Plotinus. There's a whole Tractata or Ennead of Plotinus simply called 'On Beauty'. And this also features, the hierarchy of beauty, the earthly beauty leading upwards to the higher heavenly beauty. We also find this hierarchy of beauty figuring very importantly in the teachings of the various Sufi schools within Islam. If you read

Persian Sufi mystical poetry, well, after a few lines you're sure to come across some reference to beauty in this sort of way, this sort of sense.

But in the case of Buddhism, historically speaking, even though we have that particular episode in the Pali canon, and though there are other references to beauty, even to a hierarchy of beauty, in the Buddhist scriptures, historically speaking Buddhists didn't develop this particular approach to the spiritual life. It's as though later Buddhists in the East didn't take that particular teaching of the Buddha's to heart, didn't develop it. Sometimes I wonder whether it might not be developed in the West among Western Buddhists. Because the Buddha's teachings after all are vast, oceanic, and not all those teachings have yet by any means received their full development - not in the East. And perhaps some of those teachings remain to be developed in the West. It's not that Eastern Buddhists did not, and do not, appreciate beauty. After all, they produced an enormous quantity of very fine, very great art. But they didn't recognize, it seems, that the appreciation of higher and ever higher levels of beauty can constitute a kind of spiritual path.

But be that as it may, we see that in Buddhism there are many different hierarchies. There's the cosmic hierarchy. There's the hierarchy of beings within the cosmos - the hierarchies of happiness and of power and the hierarchy of beauty, and so on. But above all in Buddhism there is the spiritual hierarchy. That is to say, in Buddhism there is a system of person and/or states ranged according to their respective positions or degrees on the scale of - for want of a better term - spirit. And this system, this hierarchy, embraces both the conditioned and the unconditioned, both the mundane and the transcendental. Let me give you an example of this kind of hierarchy, this spiritual hierarchy - an example from Buddhist tradition. Don't try, so to speak, to memorise it; just get the feeling of a hierarchy.

In this example there are eight positions or degrees - that is to say positions or degrees on the scale of spirit. Some of you may have encountered these eight in the course of your reading. First of all, there's the prthjana or worldling, the person who is overpowered by greed, hatred and delusion, and has no higher spiritual ideals in his or her life. Then comes next, higher, the Stream-entrant - that is to say, the person who has broken the first three out of the ten fetters binding to mundane existence, who has entered the stream leading eventually to Nirvana. Such a person, we are told, will not be reborn in this world more than seven times. Then there's the once-returned, who's broken more fetters, and who will be reborn in this world more than once. Then there's the non-returned, who doesn't come back to this world at all, but who gains full Enlightenment from a higher heavenly state. Then there's the Arhant, who's realized Nirvana, having destroyed all the fetters, and who's not reborn in any sphere again. And then sixthly there's the Pratyekabuddha. The Pratyekabuddha has no teacher, has no disciple, but is fully Enlightened. And seventhly the Bodhisattva, one who dedicates himself to full Enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. And eighthly and lastly the perfect Buddha.

I'm not going to give any further explanation of these terms. Some of them will be familiar to you anyway. I just want you to get the general idea of a spiritual hierarchy. Prthjana, Stream-entrant, once-returned, non-returned, Arhant, Pratyekabuddha, Bodhisattva, perfect Buddha. The great line of division here, of course, is that between the first and the second positions or degrees - that is to say between the prthjana or worldling and the Stream-entrant. The best, the most, from a spiritual point of view, that the prthjana or worldling is able to achieve is what we call in the FWBO effective Going for Refuge. That's the highest attainment, the highest achievement, of the person who is still effectively dominated by greed, hatred and delusion. The Stream-entrant achieves real Going for Refuge as we call it. The former is still mundane, whereas the latter is transcendental.

Now, corresponding to this spiritual hierarchy of persons there is a hierarchy of awarenesses or knowledges, using these words in the widest and loosest sense. In Buddhism there are a number of hierarchies of this kind - that is to say, hierarchies of awareness or knowledge. They all represent applications of the same basic principle, the principle of spiritual hierarchy, to the field of awareness or knowledge. Let me give you a few examples of these.

First of all, there's the hierarchy of what is known as the five eyes. The five eyes are the five

dimensions of vision, partly physical, partly spiritual. First of all there's the fleshly eye - that is to say, the ordinary eye with which visible objects are seen. And its range is very limited. Secondly there's the heavenly eye or divine eye. This perceives the decease and rebirth of beings in all the six realms, without meeting any obstacles, and remaining unimpeded by mountains, walls and forests. This corresponds roughly to what nowadays we usually call clairvoyance. And thirdly there's the wisdom eye. This eye cognizes the true characteristics of the various dharmas - that is to say dharmas with a small d, in the sense of ultimate elements of existence. Fourthly there's the Dharma eye. This eye is capable of knowing, with regard to individual people, by which expedient, which teaching, they can be made to find the path to liberation. And fifthly and lastly there's the Buddha eye, which is the direct intuition of all dharmas, all the ultimate elements of existence, without exception.

So these are the five eyes. The first two are mundane; the remaining three are transcendental. And then, just to give you another example, there's the hierarchy of the eight consciousnesses or awarenesses. This is a teaching of the Yogacara school, as some of you may be aware, and it's not so complicated as it might seem. First of all come the five sense consciousnesses - that is to say sight, hearing and so on. Then there's mind consciousness, consciousness of mental objects or ideas. Then comes the defiled mind consciousness or ego consciousness, mind-consciousness defiled by ego sense, which experiences existence in terms of subject and object, I and mine and so on, and which gives rise to craving and hatred. And finally comes the so-called store consciousness. This consciousness receives the impressions of our willed actions of body, speech and mind, and stores them in the form of seeds until such time as circumstances permit those seeds to sprout as vipakas or karmic consequences by us experienced.

According to some Yogacara teachers the store consciousness has an undefiled transcendental dimension. This is sometimes referred to as the ninth consciousness. Otherwise all eight consciousnesses are mundane. But though they are mundane, they can become transcendental. And this happens, they become transcendental, when there occurs what the Lankavatara Sutra calls 'a turning about' - a turning about at the very deepest level of one's being. And that turning about takes place when one realizes the illusory nature of the ego.

When one realizes this, the eight consciousnesses are transformed into the four awarenesses. Vijnanas, using the technical terminology, are transformed into jnanas. The five sense consciousnesses are collectively transformed into the all-performing awareness of the Buddha Amoghasiddhi. Amoghasiddhi, the green Buddha, symbolizes or embodies the all-performing awareness. And then mind consciousness is transformed into distinguishing awareness, that awareness which distinguishes the minute particulars of things. This is symbolized by Amitabha, the red Buddha. The defiled mind consciousness is transformed into Ratnasambhava's awareness of sameness or equality, Ratnasambhava being the golden yellow Buddha. Finally, the store consciousness is transformed into the mirror-like awareness of Aksobhya, the imperturbable, the dark blue Buddha. And this four-point transformation constitutes, according to the Yogacara teaching, Enlightenment or Buddhahood. And it's consequent upon the turning about, consequent upon the realization of the illusory nature, the ultimately illusory nature of the ego.

Now the eight consciousnesses of the Yogacara obviously constitute, especially if we accept that the store consciousness has an undefiled transcendental dimension. But the real hierarchy here is not eight or nine fold even; it is twofold. And this twofold hierarchy is the hierarchy of what I've called consciousness and awareness; that is to say, the hierarchy of vijnana and jnana. And we may say that this distinction between vijnana and jnana is of absolutely fundamental importance. It's of fundamental importance for Buddhism. It's of fundamental importance for spiritual life. We could even say that it's of fundamental importance ultimately for civilization and culture itself.

So let me say just a few words about these two terms. But before I do that I'll just make a general comment about the spiritual hierarchy. The spiritual hierarchy, or a spiritual hierarchy, consists, as we've seen, of a system of persons and/or states ranged according to their respective positions or degrees on the scale of spirit. But it's possible for us to move up that scale. The scale itself is fixed in a sense, but the persons are not fixed to that scale. It's possible for us to rise from the

lower to the higher positions or degrees on that scale. And it's in this upward movement, this progression, that the spiritual life consists.

Perhaps we'll be able to understand this better if we change the model, so to speak. Hierarchy is what we may describe as a vertical model, so let's change it for a horizontal model. So what is the horizontal equivalent of this vertical model, hierarchy. The horizontal equivalent of the hierarchy is the path or way, which is, as it were, all on the level. And just as we can move up the degrees of the hierarchy, so we can move along the stages of the path or way. The two, in fact, are really the same. Which model we prefer to think in terms of is probably a matter of taste, a matter of temperament. And of course there is what we may describe as an intermediate path, an intermediate model, and this is the model of the path up the mountainside, because this model is both vertical and horizontal.

All these models have their own merits. They're all helpful to us in our spiritual life. Personally, I may say, I find the vertical model particularly inspiring. And years ago, when I was in Kalimpong, I wrote, in fact, a poem about it. I'm going to read that poem to you, just to give you a change from what some of you may have been thinking was rather a lot of abstract ideas. And then we'll get back to vijnana and jnana. The poem is called 'The Guardian Wall', and I wrote it in 1958.

### The Guardian Wall

With sweet, compassionate faces,  
Hands outstretched, humanity's friends,  
Up to the golden zenith  
The hierarchy ascends.

In glory on glory I see them,  
Helpers of all of us,  
But the loveliest Bodhisattvas  
Are the anonymous.

Lotus-seated, rainbow-circled  
In the heaven of the void,  
They rear about the race a wall  
That may not be destroyed.

Its base is built of coral,  
The blood that they have shed,  
Its turrets sheerest diamond,  
The life of purity led.

Oh hierarchy celestial!  
Oh Tara, from thy throne  
Grant that in thy great guardian wall  
My life may be one stone.

As I mentioned at the beginning, some people have difficulty with the idea of spiritual hierarchy. In some cases they don't like to think that there is anyone spiritually above them. It makes them feel a bit uncomfortable, even perhaps a bit resentful. But I must say, speaking personally, I've never felt like that. I've always thought that it would be a dreadful thing if there was no-one in the universe, no-one in the world, who was above me spiritually, who was more developed, more Enlightened, than I was. Because the mere thought that there are such beings gives us energy, gives us strength, gives us inspiration, gives us hope. And this is still more the case if we happen to be in personal contact with them. And hence the vital importance of what we've come to call vertical kalyana mitrata, or vertical spiritual friendship. But I'm sure you're all well aware of that.

When we are not in contact with spiritual friends vertically, we can at least think of the

Bodhisattvas, the great Bodhisattvas, reflect on them, meditate on them, read about them. We can even write about them, can even give expression to our feeling of devotion to the spiritual hierarchy, just as I did in my poem all those years ago.

But let us get back to *vijnana* and *jnana*. Both these words come from the same verbal root, and that root is *jna*, to know. Now knowledge is of many different kinds. Indeed, the words *vijnana* and *jnana* themselves can be used in several different senses. But for the purpose of this talk I'm using them in the sense that they bear in the teaching of the four reliances. Some of you are no doubt already familiar with this teaching. It occurs in a number of Mahayana texts, and I've mentioned it more than once in lectures.

The four reliances are, first of all, on the teaching, not on the person who teaches. It's on the teaching that one should rely. And then on the meaning, not on the expression. Don't be misled by the expression. Try to find out what is really meant. And then thirdly, one should rely on scriptures of definitive meaning, not on scriptures of interpretable meaning. So what does this mean? It means that some passages in the Buddhist scriptures are obscure, even ambiguous, whereas others are very clear and straightforward. So one interprets the obscure in the light of the clear and straightforward. One interprets the interpretable in terms of the definitive. And fourthly one should rely on *jnana* and not on *vijnana*.

Now all four reliances are important. For the present we are concerned only with the fourth one: we should rely on *jnana*, not on *vijnana*. But what is *jnana*? What is *vijnana*? As I've already said, both words come from the same verbal root. They both come from *jna*, to know. But there is a big difference between them. *Jnana* sees things as they really are, or according to reality. *Vijnana* sees things only as they appear to be. *Jnana* is free from greed, hatred and delusion. *Vijnana* is not free from greed, hatred and delusion. *Jnana* is transcendental. *Vijnana* is mundane. *Jnana* is of the nature of Nirvana. *Vijnana* is of the nature of *samsara*.

The vast majority of people, of course, rely on *vijnana*. Their knowledge is determined by the physical senses, by the so-called rational mind, and by the ego mind or ego consciousness. Very few really rely on *jnana*. Those who do rely on *jnana* are the Stream-entrants and so on, as well perhaps as the very greatest of the great poets and thinkers. Nowadays we may in fact say that the vast majority of people not only do not rely upon *jnana*, but even have no conception of *jnana* as distinct from *vijnana*. For them knowledge is essentially *vijnana*, knowledge is essentially something empirical, something rational. Knowledge is essentially something of a sophisticated scientific type, we may say. And people have no conception of *jnana* because they have no conception of a hierarchy of consciousnesses or awarenesses, no idea that there is in fact such a thing as a spiritual hierarchy.

And we could well say that as Buddhists our greatest task in the West today is to explain the difference between *vijnana* and *jnana*, not only to explain it but even to insist upon it. Because unless this difference is understood, this difference between *vijnana* and *jnana*, unless it's understood and acted upon, there can be no real spiritual life, no real Buddhism, no real Going for Refuge as distinct from effective Going for Refuge.

So we must rely on *jnana*, not *vijnana*. But we cannot really rely on *jnana* unless we have at least some experience of it. And we cannot experience it unless we develop it. But how are we to develop it? Well, we develop it as the fruit of the momentum, we may say, of our whole spiritual life. We develop it as a result of meditation, as a result of ethics, develop it as a result of spiritual friendship, Dharma study, Right Livelihood and so on. In short, we develop it, develop *jnana* and learn to rely upon it, as a result of effective Going for Refuge, on the basis of effective Going for Refuge. And we could say that our effective Going for Refuge is not really effective unless we're trying all the time to transform it through *jnana* into real Going for Refuge. Our effective Going for Refuge is not really effective, even, unless we're trying to make the transition from *vijnana* to *jnana*, from the mundane to the transcendental.

But perhaps by this time you're beginning to wonder, well, what about *prajna*? What about *prajna paramita*? After all, this evening I'm suppose to be launching a book entitled 'Wisdom beyond

words - sense and non-sense in the Buddhist Prajnaparamita tradition'. Well, thereby hangs a tale. Originally the book was to have been called simply 'Perfect Wisdom'. We all thought this a really appropriate title. But shortly before it was due to go to press, Nagabodhi discovered that a book with exactly the same title had just been brought out by another Buddhist publisher. So the title of our book had to be changed, and that's why it's called 'Wisdom beyond words'.

But this is by the way. What about prajna? Prajna is from the same verbal root as vijnana and jnana - that is to say, it's from jna, to know. The prefix pra - so that we have pra-jna - is an intensifier. So prajna may be said to be knowledge proper, or even knowledge par excellence. It's usually translated wisdom, though this is not really very helpful. Like jnana, prajna sees things as they really are, sees them according to reality. Like jnana, prajna is free from greed, hatred and delusion; it's transcendental and of the nature of Nirvana. Nonetheless there is a great difference between the two. We may say that jnana represents a state that has been achieved. Prajna represents a function or faculty. Jnana, we may say in a word, is static; prajna is dynamic.

The nature of prajna is illustrated by a passage in the Platform Scripture, which is the foundational text of Zen Buddhism. Hui Neng, the sixth patriarch, says 'Samadhi is the quintessence of prajna, while prajna is the activity of samadhi.' Here in this context, the context of the Platform Scripture, samadhi does not mean concentration and meditation. Samadhi corresponds to jnana. At the same time we should not think that the two - that is to say, samadhi and prajna, or jnana and prajna - are really separate. As Hui Neng goes on to point out, they're like the lamp and its light. He says, 'With the lamp, there is light. Without it, it would be dark. The lamp is the quintessence of the light, and the light is the expression of the lamp. In name they are two things, but in substance they are one and the same. The same is the case with samadhi and prajna.' In other words, the same is the case with jnana and prajna.

So much then for prajna. But what about prajna paramita? As I mentioned, prajna is usually translated 'wisdom'. Similarly, prajna paramita is usually translated as Perfect Wisdom, or even the Perfection of Wisdom. It's not only a wisdom beyond words; it's even a wisdom beyond wisdom, so to speak. So in what sense is it a wisdom beyond words, in what sense is it a wisdom beyond wisdom? So in order to understand this we have to know just a little about the history of Buddhist, especially about the history of Buddhist doctrine in India.

The Buddha attained Enlightenment. That's where the story starts. That's where Buddhism starts. He attained Enlightenment under the bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya two thousand five hundred years ago, attained a state we can't even really imagine. In the traditional Buddhist phrase, the Buddha saw things as they really are. And at first, we're told, he doubted if it would be possible for him to communicate his vision to other people. It was so - well, out of this world. So he was inclined to remain silent. He was inclined not to teach. But eventually, as we know, fortunately for us, he decided he would teach. Out of compassion he decided that he would teach for the benefit of those whose eyes were covered with only a little dust.

So the Buddha taught; and what he taught was an expression of that Enlightenment experience of his, an expression in concepts, images, words. Not that he gave, as it were, a definitive description of his Enlightenment experience. He didn't say much about that, he only hinted at it, he only pointed in its direction, saying, so to speak, 'If you go in that direction you will see what I saw.' In fact the Buddha said that his teaching was like a raft. It was a means to an end, and that just as one used the raft to cross the river and get to the opposite shore, so one used his teaching to cross the flood of samsara and achieve Nirvana. His teaching, he said, in fact he insisted, was not an end in itself. It was only a means to an end. It was only a finger pointing to the moon. One shouldn't mistake the finger for the moon. Look at the finger, yes, but then from the finger, look at the moon.

But then, as time passed, as the Buddha himself passed away, as the generations passed, as one generation of disciples was succeeded by another, some of those disciples, some of those later followers, didn't do what the Buddha had asked them to do. They didn't look from the finger to the moon. They fastened their attention on the finger, so to speak. They mistook, in fact, the finger for the moon. Changing the metaphor, we may even say that they made themselves at

home on the raft, forgetting to use it to cross the flood.

And this was particularly the case with what we may describe as the more doctrinal part of the raft. The Buddha himself had given only hints, but in the course of centuries those hints hardened for some people into certainties, even into dogmas, hardened into elaborate doctrinal systems, elaborate doctrinal structures. Especially was this the case with what we know as the Abhidharma. The Abhidharma came to be regarded as literally embodying absolute truth. It's still so regarded in some Buddhist countries. But not all Buddhists agreed that the Abhidharma literally embodied absolute truth. Not all Buddhists agreed that prajna and Abhidharma were identical. And some of these Buddhists produced a literature of their own, a literature that went beyond prajna in the Abhidharma sense, a literature that went beyond literalism, that in fact fought literalism tooth and nail. And this was the literature of the Prajnaparamita tradition.

This literature was produced over a period of several hundred years, and it eventually comprised about thirty-five independent texts. Some of these texts were and are very extensive indeed. But large or small, they're all known as Sutras. They all purport to be discourses given by the Buddha himself. But we may say that the Prajnaparamita sutras are not sutras in the sense of being discourses actually given by the historical Buddha and then written down exactly as he gave them. Their particular emphasis, however, especially their anti-literalism does go back to the Buddha himself, and the Buddha's own teaching. These prajnaparamita sutras are faithful to the spirit of the Buddha's teaching.

Perhaps the best known of the Prajnaparamita sutras is the Vajracchedika, or Diamond-cutter Sutra, generally known simply as the Diamond Sutra. Then there is the Heart Sutra. There's the Prajnaparamita Sutra in 8,000 lines. There's one in 25,000 lines; there's one in 100,000 lines - that's the biggest of them all. And this vast literature, consisting in many many volumes, has been translated in its entirety into English by the late Dr Edward Conze, so that all of us should be very grateful to him. This literature, this prajnaparamita sutra literature, is not available in its entirety in any other Western language.

Gratitude is very much a Buddhist virtue. It may surprise you to learn that even the Buddhas feel gratitude. The Prajnaparamita Sutra in 8,000 lines says: 'They' - ie the Tathagatas or Buddhas - 'treat the Dharma with respect, revere, worship and adore it, for they know that this essential nature of dharmas is just the Perfection of Wisdom. For the all-knowledge of the Tathagatas has been brought about from this Perfection of Wisdom, and for that the Tathagatas are grateful and thankful to her. With justice can the Tathagata be called grateful and thankful. In gratitude and thankfulness the Tathagata favours and cherishes the vehicle on which he has come, and the path by which he has won full Enlightenment. That one should know as the gratitude and thankfulness of the Tathagata.'

So if the Buddha is grateful to the Perfection of Wisdom, how much more grateful we should be, not just to the Perfection of Wisdom, but to the Buddha himself. We should in fact be grateful to all our spiritual friends, grateful to all who have brought us into contact with the Dharma, or helped us to deepen our contact with it or understanding of it. We should be grateful to all our centres and communities, grateful for our seminars and retreats, grateful for our study groups, grateful for our team-based Right Livelihood businesses, grateful to the writers and translators of books on Buddhism, including Dr Conze, the translator of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras. Gratitude, we may say, is one of the greatest virtues.

But nowadays it is a virtue that is sadly neglected. Sometimes, in fact, I think that people are ashamed to feel gratitude, or to express it. Gratitude is for something you receive, something you've been given, something you perhaps didn't deserve, or at least that you feel you didn't deserve. And if you receive from another person, you are in a sense inferior to that person, you're on the receiving end, and people don't like to feel inferior. And therefore they often have difficulty with the idea of gratitude. They have difficulty with the idea of gratitude in much the same way, and for much the same reasons, that they have difficulty with the idea of spiritual hierarchy.

When I first came into contact with Buddhism in 1942 - that's more than half a century ago - Dr Conze had only just started translating the Perfection of Wisdom literature. There was, however, an English translation of a Chinese version of the Diamond Sutra. And when I read this it made a tremendous impression on me, as did the Platform Scripture or Sutra of Wei Lang or Hui Neng, which I read at about the same time. Reading these two works, these two texts, I realized I was a Buddhist and in fact had always been one. I've therefore always felt intensely grateful to the translators of these two books - that is to say, to William Gemmell, the translator of the Diamond Sutra, and Wong Mao Lam, the translator of the Platform Scripture, the Sutra of Wei Lang. And this is why when I published 'The Eternal Legacy' I dedicated that book to their memory.

But let's come back to the book I'm launching with Saddhaloka's help this evening. It consists mainly of edited transcripts of seminars I gave some years ago on the Diamond Sutra and on the Ratnagunasamcayagatha, or Verses on the Accumulation of Precious Qualities, which is also a Prajnaparamita text, plus an edited transcript of a lecture on the Heart Sutra. And this material has been very competently edited by Dharmachari Jinananda, who has also written the preface. And I'm very grateful to him for all the loving care he has put into this book. I'm also very grateful to Nagabodhi for publishing the book, to Dhammarati for his really beautiful cover design, as you'll see in a minute, and to Shantavira for his meticulous proofreading. Where would we authors be without our proofreaders? In fact, my thanks are due to the entire publishing team. I'm also grateful to Saddhaloka and his team for having organised this launch here this evening. I'm grateful to all of you for coming along. And no doubt I'll be still more grateful to those of you who actually purchase a copy of the book. But before you do so, let me say just a few words in conclusion about its contents.

As I've mentioned, the subtitle of the book is 'Sense and non-sense in the Buddhist Prajnaparamita tradition'. The subtitle is due to Nagabodhi, and it's of the nature of a warning. Because in the blurb that appears on the back of the book Nagabodhi speaks of the Prajnaparamita texts as 'dangerously disorienting to the unwary student'. They're disorienting because they completely upset our ideas about reality. They challenge our literalistic thinking. This is something that I've been given reason to think a lot about over the years. We think so literalistically. We look at Buddhism, look at the Dharma, so literalistically. I might even say that at least half the questions I get asked in seminars, even in people's letters, are based on literalism, that is literalistic misunderstandings. If people could only realize that they were being literalistic and how literalistic they were being, they wouldn't need to ask those particular questions.

So these Prajnaparamita texts challenge our literalistic thinking, including perhaps especially our literalistic thinking about Buddhism itself. They compel us, they oblige us, to realize that a raft, even the raft of the Dharma, is just that: a raft. They insist on our looking not just at the finger but at the moon to which the finger is pointing. In the concluding words of Nagabodhi's blurb, 'They can offer a fast route to some well-trodden blind alleys, or to the very heart of reality. Which route you take is up to you.'

Let me close by reading a hymn to the Perfection of Wisdom, from the Prajnaparamita Sutra in 8,000 lines. It's taken from chapter 7, Dr Conze's translation. Sariputra is speaking. Sariputra, addressing the Buddha, says:

'The Perfection of Wisdom gives light, O Lord. I pay homage to the Perfection of Wisdom. She is worthy of homage. She is unstained. The entire world cannot stain her. She is a source of light, and from everyone in the triple world she removes darkness. And she leads away from the blinding darkness caused by the defilements and by wrong views. In her we can find shelter. Most excellent are her works. She makes us seek the safety of the wings of Enlightenment. She brings light to the blind. She brings light so that all fear and distress may be forsaken. She has gained the five eyes, and she shows the path to all beings. She herself is an organ of vision. She disperses the gloom and darkness of delusion. She does nothing about all dharmas. She guides to the path those who have strayed onto a bad road. She is identical with all knowledge. She never produces any dharma because she forsaken the residues relating to both kinds of coverings, those produced by defilements and those produced by the cognizable. She does not stop any dharma. Herself unstopped and unproduced is the Perfection of Wisdom. She is the mother of

the Bodhisattvas on account of the emptiness of own marks. As the donor of the jewel of all the Buddha Dharmas, she brings about the ten powers of a Buddha. She cannot be crushed. She protects the unprotected, with the help of the four grounds of self-confidence. She is the antidote to birth and death. She has a clear knowledge of the own-being of all dharmas, for she does not stray away from it. The Perfection of Wisdom of the Buddhas, the Lords, sets in motion the Wheel of the Dharma.'