

## Lecture 183 - The Disappearing Buddha

Doctor Broom and friends. I must begin by saying how glad I am to be here in St James with you all this evening. A little earlier on, Doctor Broom invited all those who have not been here before, not been in St James and not been to Alternatives, to put up their hands. Then I should have put up my hand, as I haven't been here before, I haven't been inside this building before. Of course I have glimpsed it from the outside on a number of occasions, on my way to the Royal Academy. Sometimes of course I glimpsed it behind a multitude of colourful stalls and I believe on one or two occasions I even had a stroll around those colourful stalls, but I must admit that I didn't actually find my way into St James or into Alternatives.

I'm all the more glad to be here this evening. I'm glad to have been able to witness the little preliminaries, the rigmarole as I believe they were called, and especially to witness the lighting of the candles. I was asked to name a quality which could be associated with one of those three candles. This isn't quite in my notes but I'm going to say it anyway. I was asked to think of a quality, and of course you heard the quality of which I thought was courage. Well, I thought, well probably everybody who comes here says something like peace or compassion, faith. And I thought, well I'll be a little bit different. I don't suppose many people would think of courage. But I also thought of courage for a very definite reason. The reason being that I think that in the world of today, if we can stand in any way with the upholding of any sort of spiritual values, we do need a great deal of courage. Love isn't enough, we need courage to implement that love and act upon it. Truth isn't enough, well in a way truth is enough but we also need the courage to stand up for the truth, to stand by the truth in the midst of a world which only too often seems to deny the truth. So I was very glad to be able to witness and to that extent take part in the candle lighting ceremony this evening.

I was also glad to witness and take part, because in a way I felt myself to be on familiar ground, because in the context of Buddhist worship very often we light and we offer candles. Most often we offer them to the Buddha and in some forms of Buddhism we offer then reciting a little verse which may be translated something like this: "This light, this candle I offer to the Buddha, the Enlightened one who destroys the darkness, the darkness of ignorance". So the lighting of a candle, the lighting of candles has this sort of association for Buddhists, this sort of association for me.

Light is of course a universal symbol. We find this symbol in all religions, in all spiritual traditions. I remember during my days in India, I often had the opportunity of witnessing the Hindu Divali or Diwali, the festival of lights. And on that occasion it was very, very interesting, very beautiful to see that the windows and doors of all the houses in the neighbourhood would be just lit up with rows and rows of little lamps, of course they were all oil lamps. And they presented all the more beautiful a sight when in that particular town, as was the case still in those days, there was no electricity, no gas, just little oil lamps. And the whole of the town, the whole of the city, would be illuminated with rows and rows of these little oil lamps, in the windows, on the doorsteps, on the roofs, on the edges of the flat roofs, all over the town, all over the city. All representing,

or symbolising, for pious Hindus, the triumph of light over darkness, the triumph of the forces of good over the forces of evil.

Light in Buddhism represents especially spiritual knowledge, represents what we may describe as transcendental insight, represents the higher wisdom. The Buddha after his enlightenment, after his attainment of enlightenment, is represented as saying to his disciples "There arose in me knowledge, there arose in me wisdom, there arose in me light". And it's therefore perhaps not surprising, perhaps it's not just a coincidence that the Buddha is known in English as The Enlightened One, though not of course in the sense of 18th century humanistic enlightenment. And of course it's about the Buddha that I'm speaking this evening.

And at this point I have a little confession to make. I have to confess that, glad as I am to be here in St James this evening, it's a very long time since I was in a church at all, apart of course from sightseeing. And it's a very long time indeed since I actually spoke in a church. I was actually looking up in my records the last time this happened and I discovered the last time was on Sunday 15th July 1987, which is almost exactly 7 years ago. And on that occasion, that Sunday morning, I delivered a sermon in the chapel of Kings College Cambridge. And I remember this occasion, I don't remember so much what I actually said - I very often don't - but I remember the congregation, because the congregation, which was about 300 strong, consisted as far as I could see mainly of American tourists. And they hadn't come for me, oh no, they'd come to hear the music, they'd come to hear the famous Kings College choir. But of course they had forty minutes of me first. But anyway, be that as it may have been, this evening I'm going to do more or less what I did on that occasion, seven years ago in the chapel of Kings College Cambridge. Since I'm in Rome, so to speak, if I can say that in an Anglican building, since I'm in Rome so to speak I'm going to do what Rome does. Or at least what I think Rome may still do. I'm going to give a sermon on a text. But it's not quite what trendy C of E vicars, even Rectors, do nowadays. And I must admit incidentally that for quite a few years I was myself rather prejudiced against this word sermon. I didn't like to use it, I avoided it. I didn't like, for instance, to hear the Buddha's discourses to his disciples referred to as sermons. People would sometimes speak of the Buddha's first sermon. I didn't like that. But in recent years I've changed my mind. I've concluded that after all sermon is a good old English word. It comes to us via the old French from the Latin sermo to discourse, probably from serere, which means to join together. So not such a bad old word after all, we may think. Of course, some of our greatest English literature exists in the form of sermons, believe it or not. One thinks, for instance, of the sermons of John Donne and of Jeremy Taylor. One thinks even of the sermon also of Cardinal Newman.

So I'm going to give a sermon this evening, I'm going to give a sort of sermon. Or at least this talk of mine will be a sermon to the extent that it is based on a text. I'm going to take my text from the Pali Mahaparanibbana sutta. So perhaps I should first of all say just a little about the Buddhist scriptures. In some ways you're lucky not to be a Buddhist, those of you who are not Buddhists, because the Buddhist scriptures are absolutely enormous. Christians are quite lucky, they just have – well it's not a very small volume, it's quite a

thick volume even printed on India paper – they just have got this one volume Bible. Muslims are even luckier, they've got something much smaller. But Buddhists have got several hundred volumes of scriptures. So if you're a serious-minded Buddhist who takes your studies seriously, well, in a way, you've got a problem. But of course, some Buddhist scriptures are better known than others.

Let me give you some idea of how the Buddhist scriptures are organised and divided. They're usually divided into three great main collections. First of all there's the collection of the discourses of the Buddha, talks given by the Buddha, or if you like, sermons delivered by the Buddha. Some of them are long – some of the Mahayana sutras are several volumes long, just one discourse. Others are very short, just a few lines, even a few verses. So first of all the collection of discourses. And then there's the collection of rules for monks and nuns. There are not so many of these, there are only five volumes, which most monks and nuns find quite sufficient. So the collection of rules for monks and nuns, many of which of course are really no longer relevant in the modern world. And then there's a third collection which is rather difficult to translate, the term is Abhidharma, but let's say the collection of the rather more analytical, rather more philosophical teachings.

So there are these three great collections, these consisting of many, many volumes, the collection of the discourses, the collection of the rules for monks and nuns and the collection of more philosophical types of teachings. Now if we take the first collection, the collection of discourses, discourses by the Buddha, this consists of four groups of discourses. And the first of these groups is known as the group of long discourses. The discourses are simply long. They're classified as long regardless of their actual subject matter. And in the Pali recension of the scriptures, I won't go into this question of how many recensions of the Buddhist scriptures there are, but in the Pali recension of the scriptures, there are 34 of these long discourses. Some of them are about the same length as the Christian gospels. And I'm going to take my text from discourse No. 16, known as the Mahaparanibbana Sutta, or discourse, or if you like sermon, of the great decease. That's how it's usually translated and the decease in question is the decease of the Buddha himself. Buddhists don't usually speak of the death of the Buddha, out of reverence for the Buddha. They speak of his Mahaparinibbana which means something like final passing away, or great decease. The Buddha, as you probably know, died or passed away at the age of about 80. Before he passed away he went on a quite extensive farewell tour. Don't forget he went on foot, and for a man of 80 it was quite an undertaking, but he wanted to bid farewell to the different groups of disciples that he had scattered all over North Eastern India. So he walked from village to village, from one group of little huts to another, from town to town, and wherever he went he gave teachings. The Mahaparinibbana Sutta is the story so to speak of that final tour of the Buddha. It describes his meetings with his various groups of disciples. It describes the teachings he gave, right up to the very end, when as a very old man aged 80 he passed away lying between two beautiful sal trees. So in the passage I'm going to read, which is our text for the evening, the Buddha is addressing Ananda. Ananda is the Buddha's cousin, one of his cousins, and his long-term companion. Ananda has been with the Buddha day in and day out for about 20 odd years. Ananda is sometimes known on

account of his personal closeness to the Buddha as the St John of Buddhism. St John being of course, as most of you will know, the beloved disciple. And in this particular passage, this particular text, the Buddha is addressing Ananda on what you might think is a rather strange subject. He's addressing Ananda on the subject of the eight great kinds of assemblies. I'm going to read the passage, going to read this text.

"Ananda there are these eight kinds of assemblies. They are the assembly of Khattiyas, the assembly of Brahmins, the assembly of householders, the assembly of ascetics, ... of devas of the realm of the four Great kings, ... of the 33 gods, ... of maras, ... of Brahmas. I remember well, Ananda, many hundreds of assemblies of Khattiyas, that I have attended and before I sat down with them, spoke to them, or joined in their conversation, I adopted their appearance, and speech, whatever it might be. And I instructed, inspired, fired and delighted them with a discourse on Dhamma. And as I spoke with them, they did not know me and understand and wondered, who is it that speaks like this? A deva, or a man? And having thus instructed them, I disappeared. And still they did not know he who has just disappeared. Was he a deva, or a man? I remember well many hundreds of assemblies of Brahmins, etc of householders, etc... Of Brahmins, and still they did not know who he has just disappeared. Was he a deva or a man? Those Ananda are the eight assemblies. "

So let's get into this a little gradually. First of all, the eight assemblies. The Khattiyas are mentioned first. The Khattiyas or Ksatriyas in Sanskrit, are the nobles, the warriors, they are [?] the land-owning or ruling class or caste of ancient India. The Buddha himself was born into this particular caste, the caste of the Khattiyas or Ksatriyas as also was Ananda. But of course the Buddha did not attach any importance to hereditary caste.

And no distinction of caste was observed within the Sangha or spiritual community which he founded. On one occasion the Buddha said that just as the great rivers of India on reaching the ocean, the mighty ocean, lost their separate identities, separate names, so on becoming members of his Sangha, his spiritual community, people from the different castes, Shakya, Brahmana, Vaisya, Shudra, and so on, lost their identities as members of those particular castes and they all became, regardless of their social origin, simply sons and daughters, spiritual sons and spiritual daughters, of the Buddha. Then the Brahmins of course were the hereditary priests, the hereditary priests of what wasn't exactly Hinduism, then it was more like Vedism. The Brahmins believed in the Vedas, the four Vedas. They believed in them not just as literary documents, in fact they were transmitted orally, they believed in them as revealed truth, as divine revelation. And the Brahmins officiated at a variety of sacrifices including even animal sacrifice based on Vedic texts. And the Brahmins of course were very keen on maintaining their social-religious status. In later generations the Brahmins liked to style themselves as gods on earth. And the Buddha, it's not surprising to learn, clashed with them on a number of occasions because he did not accept their hereditary pretensions. Some Brahmins of course, in fact quite a number of Brahmins actually, became the Buddha's disciples. Sariputra for instance was by birth a Brahmin. Sariputra is usually regarded as the chief disciple of the Buddha. His official title was the Dhamma (??) which means the Commander-in-Chief of the Dhamma. So this reminds us of his quality of courage. You can't be the Commander-in-Chief even of an ordinary army without courage unless (??) you stay right behind the lines of course as sometimes happens nowadays, and if you're

going to be Commander-in-Chief of the Dhamma, the Spiritual Truth, well you need more courage, far more courage, infinitely more courage even than an ordinary Commander-in-Chief. So where were we? Yes. So Sariputra despite his birth as a Brahmin was one of the, or became one of the Buddha's disciples. And then there's the assembly of householders, the gahapatis (?). They were the heads of families because in India in those days, as in India still today, families weren't nuclear - they were joined families. You could have fifteen, twenty, thirty, forty, up to a hundred people, all living under the same roof or collection of roofs as one family with a single head, the gahapati. And these householders, these gahapatis especially were engaged in economic activities, in trade. And then we have the ascetics. These were the non-Vedic, even anti-Vedic religious wanderers and teachers, the (?). They were the sort of alternative people of those days. The Pali word for them is samana. Samana means one who makes an effort. That is to say of course a spiritual effort. An effort in the direction of personal spiritual development. The Buddha's contemporaries, according to the Pali scriptures especially, the Buddha's contemporaries regarded him as a samana. He is usually referred to as samana Dharma. To his disciples of course he was the Maha samana, the great samana. Now Khattiyas, Brahmins, householders and ascetics, the members of the first four out of the eight assemblies are of course all human beings. Khattiyas, Brahmins, householders and ascetics, all human beings. But the members of the next four assemblies are not human beings at all. They're what we may describe as supernatural beings. Or perhaps I should say supernormal beings, because according to Buddhism, the supernatural in this sense is also natural, it's natural in the sense that it's included in the realm of what Buddhists call conditioned existence, included within the higher reaches of the samsara. Now in this particular text, the one from which I've been reading describing the eight assemblies, the Buddha mentions only four kinds of supernatural beings. But if we look at the Pali texts as a whole we'll find about 30 different kinds mentioned, about 30 different kinds of supernatural, supernormal beings. But this is of course much too complicated to go into this evening, fascinating though it might be if we had time. So I'm going to simplify things. I'm going to lump the members of the fifth and sixth assemblies together, and I'm going to translate the broadest terms into the roughly corresponding Christian ones. So in this way we have an assembly, a double assembly we may say, of angels of two different kinds. But there are still two assemblies left. I'm going to continue to translate into the roughly corresponding Christian terms. We've got the assembly of maras and the assembly of the Gods of the thirty three. So the assembly of maras, let's render it as the assembly of satans. And the other assembly, let's render it as the assembly of archangels.

But the Buddha, the text tells us, appears in all eight of these assemblies. The Khattiyas, Brahmins, householders, the ascetics, and then using the Christian terms, Angels, Satans and Archangels. But before appearing in any of them, what does he do? It says he adopts their appearance and speech. In other words he does what St Paul says he does. He becomes all things to all men. Of course in this case all men and all gods. But he does this on an even greater scale. We may say he becomes all things not only to all men but to all Angels, all Archangels and even to all Satans. And a very important principle is involved here. If you like you could criticise the mythological framework if it bothered you, as it might, and just concentrate on the principle that's involved here. The principle

involved here is, that if you want to communicate with people, and don't forget the Buddha entered these assemblies to communicate the Dharma, if you want to communicate with people you must meet them half way. You must even adopt their appearance, look like them. You must speak their language both literally and metaphorically. And this principle applies at all levels from the highest to the lowest. From a Buddha's communication to those who are not Buddhas, to our own communication with one another. But you may ask 'Why is it necessary for us to adopt the appearance of those to whom we speak or with whom we're trying to communicate? Why is it necessary?' You can understand perhaps why it's necessary for us to speak their language. If we didn't speak their language, whether literally or metaphorically of course they wouldn't understand us. But why do we need to look like them? Why do we appear, why do we need to appear as one of them in the interests of effective communication? We can say that in the case of the Buddha, if he had appeared as the Buddha, as he really was in truth and reality, it would have been too much. It would have been too much for them whether they were gods or whether they were human beings. It would have been rather like, to take an illustration from classical Greek mythology, it would be like Zeus appearing to Semele in his full splendour. And you know what happened to Semele those who remember your Greek mythology. Well, when Jupiter did appear as himself, as Zeus, at her rather foolish and rash request, she was simply burnt up by that overpowering splendour. And there's also a little parallel to that in the Christian tradition, because according to the gospel, at the time of the transfiguration the three disciples of Jesus who witnessed his transfiguration were confused and frightened -- they could not bear it. Presumably because they'd had a glimpse of Jesus as he really was.

But on our own level, why is it important for us to even look like others at least to some extent when we want to communicate with them? Let me give you a bit of an example just from my own experience. As you heard a little earlier on, I returned to England from India some thirty years ago. I returned having spent twenty years in the East. And for nearly all that time I lived as a Buddhist monk. And I returned to England at the invitation of Buddhist friends in London to teach Buddhism, to teach the Dhamma. And I came as a Buddhist monk. Not only was I a Buddhist monk, I really looked one. Because I came complete with my flowing yellow robe, which was a bit inconvenient getting on and off buses, and my shaven head which really wasn't adapted to the English winter. And I can say in the course of the two, three maybe four years that I spent teaching Buddhism, teaching the Dhamma, as a Buddhist monk and looking like a Buddhist monk, I did have some success. But I also have to admit that I did encounter certain difficulties. And one of the difficulties was that on account of my appearance, my very ascetic, very spiritual, very holy appearance, people started projecting on to me, projecting in the Jungian sense. Of course sometimes they projected positively, but sometimes they projected rather negatively. They felt me to be a rather threatening sort of figure. But they projected. But why was it that they were able to project at all? What made it psychologically possible? They were able to project because I appeared different, because I was other, because I was strange. I remember not long after my arrival I was interviewed by various journalists, most of them seemed to come from women's magazines, for some reason or other, and I remember being asked 'Are you allowed out of the monastery?' and they'd also ask -- 'Are you allowed to speak to people?' as though

I was some sort of Buddhist Trappist. And I remember also I was asked 'Who sent you?' I used to say 'Well nobody sent me. I was invited, and I accepted the invitation and I came!' They seemed to think there was sort of some sort of mysterious Buddhist Pope-like figure away in the mysterious East that was sending me on some sort of secret mysterious mission. And they were quite surprised, sometimes a bit disappointed, when they learned I'd come more or less under my own steam. So these are just little examples. So people, many of them projected onto me, whether positively or negatively, but yes they projected. And because they projected they weren't really able to experience me or communicate with me as I really was. I won't say really was in the ultimate metaphysical sense, but at least as I really was in the more conventional sense. And it's because they were unable to experience me as I really was, so to speak, that the real communication between us could not go beyond a certain point. In almost all cases this is what I found. And I found that there was a limit therefore to what I could really teach. Because teaching isn't just laying down the law, spelling out the facts, teaching is also a real genuine communication, person to person, heart to heart, mind to mind, even soul to soul. So after a few years I decided not to wear robes. I was quite happy with robes in India. In the East they're quite convenient, especially in hot weather. But here in Britain I decided after a few years not to wear robes except sometimes on ceremonial occasions when a little colour was called for. And I also allowed my hair to grow. In fact I must confess I allowed it to grow somewhat longer than it is now. And this upset some people very much indeed. It was an eye-opener to me how much it shocked some people. I was just the same, I was still myself, I'd only changed these externals, but these externals mean so much to people. I realised in the end that some people at least had become upset because I'd disturbed their projections on to me. But on the whole I found that my communication with people improved. I was able to communicate better, more as it were heart to heart and mind to mind and I was therefore able to communicate more effectively; I founded the FWBO. But that's another story, which is known to some of you, perhaps it doesn't at this stage concern others.

So we can see, perhaps we can get a glimpse of something of the rationale for appearing like other people. I've just thought of a little story, it's not in my notes but those who are accustomed to hearing me will know that sometimes the little stories pop up. Because I remember things that I've heard or experienced back in India. It's just another little example of a sort of projection. I remember I had a friend in Calcutta, a Bengali lady, who was a very great devotee of Ramakrishna. Some of you must have heard of Ramakrishna, the famous Bengali mystic of the last century. And she said that when she was a little girl, she was taken by her mother to see the widow of Sri Ramakrishna, whose name was Sarada Devi, who was revered as a great spiritual teacher. And in Bengali as in other Indian languages the word for goddess and lady is the same: devi. So my friend told me that her mother told her "We're going to see Sarada Devi, we're going to the this wonderful devi, this great spiritual figure". So the little girl got very, very excited, she was really looking forward to visiting that particular part of Calcutta, I think it was Babazar, where Sarada Devi lived in her little Hermitage. So the great day came. Along she went, this little girl of eight, this friend of mine as she became, to see the devi, the goddess. So she saw her. And she got back home and her mother asked her, "Well, what do you think of the devi?" she said "Devi? There wasn't any devi, there's only an old

widow woman". Now what had the little girl thought? The little girl was accustomed to seeing images of Hindu gods and goddesses with six, eight, or ten or twelve arms. And this devi had only two arms. So she thought 'it can't be a real devi, a real goddess'. She'd been expecting to see someone with six, eight, or ten or twelve arms. But here was the little old widow with just two. She was deeply disappointed. So this is a sort of illustration of the kind of expectations, and in a way you could say projections, that we build up. Because of course had the little girl been really devoted and projecting strongly, which she wasn't, she would have seen ten or twelve arms there. But I sometimes think that when I had my yellow robes on, sometimes people saw six or eight or ten arms. And when there were no more yellow robes there were no more arms. And some people were really very disappointed. So anyway that was just by the way, but you can see perhaps the rationale for appearing like other people. It enables us to communicate better. Here we're too different, we can be a little bit different of course, well we are different anyway, but we mustn't be too different, otherwise people will project onto us and projection interferes with communication. Perhaps this is the reason why bishops no longer go around in full regalia, mitre, crozier, and so on as they did in the middle ages. You'd be very surprised if you met a bishop in full regalia walking along Piccadilly, wouldn't you? And perhaps it's even the reason why many clergymen no longer wear what I believe are called their dog collars. But let's go back to our text, let's go back to our text.

"Having adopted their appearance and speech, the Buddha addresses the members of the various assemblies." The text speaks of him delivering a discourse on Dhamma. The word Dhamma, or Dharma in Sanskrit, has quite a number of meanings. But here in this particular context it means something like truth or reality. It's the truth or reality, we may say, in a manner of speaking, the objective content of the Buddha's experience, his spiritual, his transcendental experience, when he became enlightened, when he became a Buddha. Now the text does not actually say what the Buddha actually said. It simply said that he delivered a discourse on Dhamma. It doesn't mention any specific teaching. But it does tell us what the effect of the Buddha's discourse was. Whether gods or men, the Buddha's hearers were instructed, inspired, fired and delighted. And this is very important. It's important because religion, a discourse, shouldn't just instruct us, shouldn't just communicate factual information, even of a religious nature, important though such information may be and useful though it may be. It should also inspire us, it should inspire us with enthusiasm, it should fill us with overwhelming delight. One often listens to a discourse or sermon with feelings very far removed from overwhelming delight. But if it cannot do that, if it cannot inspire and delight us, well it won't affect us. It won't sink in, we won't remember it. It won't help us to change our lives. Another little incident from my life in India. I used to give so many lectures in India. William was asking me just a little while ago, or rather he was reminding me, that I don't give many talks these days and I said "well yes I don't". But I used to give hundreds in India. And I used to go round villages and towns, especially in North India, and Western India, Central India, and sometimes I'd give a talk where I'd talked perhaps fifteen, twenty years earlier. And people would remember. But what would they remember? They always remembered the stories. They remembered the parables. They didn't always remember the principles, the rules or anything of that sort, but the parables, the stories they



remembered, because the stories delighted them, the stories had fired them. The story had even inspired them so they remembered them. I think that is a very important point.

So we see that the Buddha's hearers, each of the eight assemblies were instructed, inspired, fired, and delighted. The Khattiyas were delighted, the Brahmins were delighted, and so on. Even, we're told, the maras or satans were delighted. And think what an achievement that must have been. It's very interesting because the maras or satans in Buddhism are wicked, even evil, beings. Wicked or evil, supernatural or supernormal beings. But the Buddha nonetheless adopts their appearance and speech too. He doesn't shrink from that. He enters their assembly too. He delivers a discourse on Dhamma to them. What is the result? They too are instructed, inspired, fired, and delighted. Presumably they are permanently affected, presumably they are changed. Presumably they cease to be satans, presumably they become angels. This is an example of what we may describe as the radical optimism of Buddhism. That is to say Buddhism's conviction that even the weakest person, even the monstrously evil person can change. And this is perhaps reminiscent if we look at the Christian tradition, reminiscent of Origen's belief that even the devil will eventually be saved. This is a belief of course which the Christian Church as a whole has not unfortunately shared. But after they have been instructed, inspired, fired, and delighted with the Buddha's discourse on the Dhamma, what do the members of the different assemblies do? What do they say? They say 'Who is it that speaks like this? A deva or a man?'. 'Who is it that speaks like this?' The Buddha has come among them like one of themselves. But they know that it cannot be one of themselves speaking. They've never been so deeply affected before. It's rather like what happens when we read a wonderful poem by a poet of whom we've never heard before. Wonderful poem. We want to know more about it. We want to know who he is, this wonderful new poet. So in the same way the Buddha's hearers all ask 'Who is it that speaks like this? They're full of wonder; they're overwhelmed. They know that someone has spoken to them, they know it's not one of themselves, even though appearing like one of themselves. They want to know who it is. So they try to identify, they try to categorise him. And this of course is what we usually do. We try to understand the unknown with the help of the known, the unfamiliar with the help of the familiar. Sometimes it works, very often it works. But sometimes it doesn't. And the Khattiyas, and the Brahmins, and the others, they seem to operate with two principal categories. They ask: 'Is he a deva', that is to say a god, 'or a man?' It seems not to occur to them that there is any third category. 'Is he a deva -- a god -- or a man?' And this is very much the situation in the West today. We still operate with these two categories. The Buddha, we may say, has appeared amongst us. He's appeared in the West, appeared in Europe, appeared in America. Not of course in the flesh. We've learned about him from books. He's appeared to us from the pages of books. And we've seen pictures, we've seen images of him, some of them very impressive, very inspiring, very beautiful. And we've become acquainted with his teachings, at least to some extent. Perhaps we've even been impressed by him and his teaching. And so we want to know more about and we ask, 'Who is the Buddha?' And sometimes we don't really wait for an answer. We try to answer the question ourselves. We seek to categorise the Buddha by applying to him terms with which we are already familiar, just like the Khattiyas, and the Brahmin, and others. And thus we see him either as a man, either as a human teacher rather like

Socrates, or perhaps like Confucius. Or we see him as a kind of Oriental god. Sometimes, if we're a bit more sophisticated, we think that the Buddha was a human teacher, who his followers unfortunately made into a god. And we talk of the Buddha's followers as having deified him. Sometimes scholars even speak of the Buddha being a human teacher in the Theravada and a deified figure in the Mahayana, and so on. You may remember those famous lines of Kipling from his poem 'Mandalay'. These reflect the popular view of the Buddha as a god.

"Bloomin idol, made of mud,  
What they called the great god Bud"

From 'Mandalay'.

Well this is how some of our ancestors not so very long ago saw the Buddha, 'the great god Bud' . Hindus of course very often see the Buddha as a god. They see him as the ninth incarnation of their own god Vishnu. But Buddhists themselves don't accept this. They don't accept that the Buddha was a human being in the ordinary sense, and they don't accept that he was a god or God with a capital G.

In the West of course the whole question is complicated by the fact that Buddhists are seen to worship the Buddha. I spoke a little while ago about Buddhists offering lighted candles to the Buddha. Well, they offer lots of other things, they often offer incense, they offer flowers, they offer food, they offer tormas, all sorts of symbolical representations of the whole universe. They offer all sorts of things. They offer them of course before his image or his picture. And to the Christian or ex-Christian Westerner this rather suggests that, that the Buddha is being treated as God. Even that he is God for Buddhists. Because in the West customary worship is only offered to God. So that if you worship someone or something it's thought he or it must be your God. But this is not true of Buddhists. In Buddhism worship is offered to anyone who is superior, especially spiritually superior. And Eastern Buddhists will often speak of worshipping their parents. I used to hear pious Hindus say 'Well I'll come out with you in just a minute, I'll go and worship my parents first', meaning that they'd go to their parents, bow down, touch their feet, take their blessing and then off they'd go. They call this worshipping their parents. In the same way [?] worship your teacher, even your primary school teacher. They speak of that too, in those terms. They use the same word, it's derived from the Pali and Sanskrit 'puja'. Worship. So the fact that Buddhists worship the Buddha does not mean that they regard him as God. What then is the Buddha? If he is not man, if he is not God, who is he? Buddhists will say usually that he belongs to a third category, not man, not god, whether with a small G or a capital G. He belongs to a third category, a category quite separate and quite distinct from the other two. They will say that he is one who has completely eliminated greed, hatred and delusion. One who knows from his personal experience absolute reality. One who is, so to speak, at one with absolute reality. One who possesses supreme wisdom, who manifests infinite compassion. And they will say that one who has achieved all this by his own human efforts, but who has gone so far beyond humanity as we know it that he can no longer be called a man, without nonetheless assuming the cosmic functions that we usually associate with the

idea of God with a capital G, who is neither man nor god, who belongs to a distinct third category, he is Buddha, the Buddha. So that when we ask: 'Who is the Buddha?' we can really only say he is the Buddha. In the text the Khatiyas, the Brahmins and so on they cannot even say that, because after instructing them the Buddha just disappears. And they are left wondering. They're left wondering: 'Was he a deva, or a man?' We'll come back to that in a minute. Meanwhile I want to say just something about the Buddha's other titles.

Buddha, the word Buddha itself, is a title, is not a proper name. And it means one who understands, one who is wise, who is awake, awake to reality. But the Buddha is known by quite a number of other titles. And we don't always realise this. In the West the Buddha is generally known simply as the Buddha, the Enlightened One. But in the Buddhist scriptures he's often referred to as the Tathagatha. In fact he's often represented in the Buddhist scriptures as usually referring to himself in the third person as the Tathagatha. There's a lot of discussion about the meaning of this term. There are several different explanations. And there's more than one grammatical analysis of the term, but I won't bother you with this. It means, Tathagatha means literally, 'He who goes', but it also means 'He who comes'. The Buddha goes through wisdom. He goes through wisdom from the mundane to the transcendental. And he comes through compassion back from the transcendental into the mundane. He comes in order to teach, in order to show the path to liberation. He comes in order to instruct, inspire, fire, and delight, with a discourse on the Dhamma. As he does when he enters the assemblies of the Khatiyas, the Brahmins and so on. The Buddha is both the embodiment of wisdom and compassion. He goes through the one, comes through the other. And this underlines the point, the fact that the Buddha comes through compassion. This underlines the point that Buddhism is not a cold religion as people sometimes think. It stresses compassion just as much as it stresses wisdom. Tathagatha has another meaning, Tathagatha means 'one who acts as he speaks, and speaks as he acts'. This might seem a rather prosaic virtue, nothing very exciting, nothing very exotic, but it's not really so. Because we shall realise - if we reflect a minute - that our own words and acts are very, very rarely in anything like harmony. There's almost always a discrepancy, whether slight or great. A discrepancy between our words and our actions, our professions and our behaviour. But in the Buddha's case, in the Buddha's case it's not so, speech and action are in perfect harmony. Moreover they're in harmony at the highest possible, the highest conceivable level. The Buddha is an enlightened being and speaks and acts like an enlightened being.

The Buddha's also known as 'Lokavidu', which means Knower Of The World. This doesn't mean that the Buddha's worldly-wise, though of course one may also say the Buddha wasn't exactly lacking in worldly wisdom. It means that he knows the world, knows mundane existence, as it really is. He knows that the world is transitory. He knows that existence involves suffering. He knows that it possesses no inherent reality of its own. And this knowledge of his, this knowledge of the world is not merely theoretical, it's a matter of real understanding, real experience. And he therefore acts in accordance with it.

We of course do not know the world. Worldly-wise though we may be, we do not know mundane existence as it really is. We like to think that the world is permanent, pleasurable and possessed of an inherent reality of its own. And because we think in this way we tend to become attached to the world. Very, very attached to it. We try to cling on to this or that aspect of it and in this way we create suffering for ourselves and very often suffering for others too.

The Buddha's also known as the Jina. Jina means The Conqueror or The Victor. He's known as the Jina not because he has conquered others but because he has conquered himself. The Dhammapada says -- the Dhammapada is one of the shorter and most popular Buddhist texts -- the Dhammapada says -- and it's the Buddha speaking -- "Though one may conquer a thousand men in battle, a thousand times, he who conquers himself has the more glorious victory."

Another of the Buddha's titles is Bhagavan. Bhagavan means one who is possessed of all positive auspicious qualities. Compassion, wisdom, purity, generosity and so on. And the Buddha is usually called Bhagavan, or spoken of as Bhagavan, or addressed as Bhagavan when he is regarded as an object of devotion.

And then there is the title of Mahavira. Mahavira means great hero. Here we can see the quality of courage come in. Hero. The Buddha is so called because he has the courage to face the forces of darkness, the forces of evil, both within his own mind and outside. The Buddha is not a meek and mild sort of character. He was vigorous, he was bold, he was fearless, he was resolute. I rather shocked some of my friends a few years ago I remember -- another little anecdote -- because they asked me who I thought the Buddha resembled among all the different historical characters. Or rather which historical character I thought most resembled the Buddha. And I said at once Julius Caesar. And they were very shocked. But why did I say Julius Caesar? Why did I say that Julius Caesar resembled the Buddha more than any other historical character? Well, it was because of his promptitude and courage. If Caesar saw that something was to be done -- I'm not speaking now whether it was necessarily right or wrong -- if he saw that there was something to be done he did it -- no hesitation, no delay, no shilly-shallying, no wobbling, no uncertainty, no doubt, no scepticism, no lack of self-confidence. He was the embodiment of self-confidence; so was the Buddha, on an infinitely higher spiritual plane. The Buddha we may say -- don't misunderstand, don't take this too literally -- the Buddha was like the Julius Caesar of the spiritual life. But of course we mustn't forget that the Buddha has been born into a warrior family. He didn't have a bookish education, he didn't go to university. He couldn't even read or write. There's one incident in one of the gospels where Jesus is represented as drawing characters on the ground in the dust, yes? Those who know their Bibles. But the Buddha isn't represented as being able even to do that. Because in the India of his day there was no literacy. Knowledge, wisdom, was transmitted by word of mouth. So the Buddha didn't have a bookish education. He learned the traditions of his community, he heard religious teachers and he himself always taught orally. The sort of education the Buddha had might even shock some of us. He was educated in all sorts of martial arts and was prompt and bold and vigorous and those qualities he directly sublimated [?] into the spiritual path. In fact once he told

his disciples that they too were warriors. He said to them, "Disciples, what are you?". He said, "You're warriors, and you're warriors because you fight. You fight for ethics, sila. You fight for meditation, Samadhi. You fight for wisdom, panna. You fight for freedom, vimutti. But the Buddha was a hero, a great hero, a Mahavira.

The Buddha was also called lokadesa. This means roughly the elder brother of the world. He's called the elder brother of the world because he has been born before us, like an elder brother. Not born before us as a human being, born before us as a Buddha. And this suggests that what the Buddha has attained, we too can attain. At present we are not Buddhas, we are unenlightened. But we can become enlightened, at least we can make progress towards enlightenment if we make the effort, if we tread the spiritual path. If we practise ethics, meditation, and develop wisdom, we'll be liberated.

But perhaps I've said enough, that's more than enough about the Buddha's titles; it's time we got back to our text. You'll remember that the Khattiyas and others were instructed, inspired, fired, and delighted by the Buddha's discourse on the Dhamma. But they don't know who has spoken to them. They're just left wondering. And then what happens? The Buddha simply disappears. He doesn't introduce himself, he doesn't identify himself, he just vanishes. And he tells Ananda, "and having thus instructed them, I disappeared, and still they did not know, he who has just disappeared, was he a deva or a man?" Now, we may think that we're in a better position than the Khattiyas and others. We may think we know who it was. After all, the Buddha in this text tells us who it was, or at least he tells Ananda who it was. But do we really know who it was? Do we really know who is the Buddha, even after hearing those words of the text? Do you really know who the Buddha is, even after listening to me for the last oh, hour and ten minutes?

I'm reminded of very early Indian art depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha. They depict the Buddha gaining enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. They depict him teaching his disciples, depict him subduing a mad elephant and so on. But there's a very strange thing about all these representations, and that is that the Buddha himself is not represented, the Buddha himself is not shown. Everything else is represented: trees, buildings, animals, crowds of people; but the Buddha is not represented. Where you would have expected to find the Buddha, there's an empty space. And everything is happening, as it were, around this empty space. Sometimes in the empty space there's a symbol. Just a Bodhi tree, if the scene is that of the Buddha's enlightenment. A stupa, if the scene is that of the final passing away. A Dharmachakra, a wheel of the Dharma, if the Buddha is supposed to be teaching, and so on. Why is this, why the empty space? Why just the symbol? Originally it was thought that - that is thought by Western art critics - that the artists and the sculptors felt that they could not do justice to the figure of the Buddha. But later it was realised that this was not the reason, not the real reason why they did not represent him. They did not represent him because they wanted to convey the fact that the Buddha as such was a transcendental being. In their language he was lokuttara, he was beyond the world or hyper conscious. He was a transcendental being because he'd realised the transcendental sense of Nirvana. We can go further than that. We speak of the Buddha, Nirvana etc. as though they were objects. We can't really help speaking of something that way if we are to speak of them at all. But in reality they're

not objects, that is to say not objects as opposed to subjects, as opposed to perceiving subjects. They're not objects because in reality, in themselves so to speak, they transcend the subject-object duality. But although they are not objects, we think of them and speak of them as though they were objects. We can hardly do otherwise, as I've said, if we are to speak at all about them. So the Buddha appears to the Khatiyas and others. He appears to them as one of themselves. He appears to them as an object, an objectively existing personal being. And as an object, a person, he instructs, inspires, fires, and delights. Then he disappears. So what does this mean, what does this disappearance mean? The disappearance means that he is not really an object. It means that he transcends the subject-object distinction of ?(word inaudible). He is not included in the picture. In a sense it's no use asking who he is, if asking who means trying to identify him as a particular kind of object, a particular kind of person object. There's a famous verse from the Diamond Sutra, one of the best known of the Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, which is relevant here. The Buddha again is represented as speaking and he's represented as saying

“Those who by my form did see me,  
and those who followed me by voice,  
wrong the efforts they engaged in,  
me those people will not see.

From the Dharma should one see the Buddhas,  
from the Dharma bodies comes their guidance,  
yet Dharma's true nature cannot be discerned,  
and no-one can be conscious of it as an object”.

The Dharma is not an object. The Buddha is not an object. One cannot know who the Buddha is by asking what kind of object he is. So, how can one know the Buddha? Well perhaps a story from the Zen tradition may throw some light on the matter. And with this I'll conclude.

The legendary founder of the Zen tradition was of course Bodhidharma. Bodhidharma was an enlightened master who went from South India to China in the sixth century. And when he'd been in China for a while he actually met the Emperor of China. And the Emperor of China in those days was a very pious Buddhist. He performed many acts, many great works of piety. He built temples and monasteries, he distributed lots of money in alms, and so on. So when he met the South Indian master, the Emperor asked the master how much merit he had accumulated as a result of all those good deeds. It seems that the Emperor was quite proud of all those good deeds. So he asked Bodhidharma, “how much merit do you think I've accumulated by performing all these good deeds?” So what sort of reply did Bodhidharma say? He said, “no merit at all.” And the emperor like a lot of pious people in similar circumstances was deeply shocked. And when he'd recovered himself he asked another question. He asked, “What then do you teach?”, meaning that if you don't teach that good deeds should be performed and that good deeds produce merit, what on earth do you teach? And Bodhidharma replied, “vast emptiness and nothing meritorious there is”. Vast emptiness is of course a Buddhist term

for ultimate reality beyond the subject-object duality and therefore of course beyond self, beyond merit, beyond the accumulation of merit and so on. But of course the poor pious Emperor became just still more confused. But he managed to come out just with one more question. "Well if you teach, if there's just this vast emptiness, nothing meritorious within, if there's nothing that's there, well who are you that's standing before me?". In other words if everything is empty, there's no subject-object distinction, who are you? Well Bodhidharma's reply was short and to the point. He said, "I don't know". "I don't know". So the Emperor was left wondering. Just as the Khattiyas and others were left wondering when the Buddha disappeared. Just as we perhaps are left wondering. But if we wonder long enough, and if we wonder deeply enough, perhaps one day we shall get an answer to our question, "Who is the Buddha?"