

Tape 186: Great Buddhists of the Twentieth Century Sangharakshita

Doctor Vajrajnana [??] and friends, and I must say first of all that I am very glad, very pleased, to be here addressing you this afternoon. And I'm very pleased to be speaking once again, after an interval of many years, under the auspices of the Maha Bodhi Society. And I'm glad also to be speaking on the subject of Great Buddhists of the Twentieth Century. As Doctor Vajrajnana has already intimated, my contact with the Maha Bodhi Society goes back quite a long way. It goes back, not only into the 60s, not only into the 50s, it goes right the way back into the 40s. It goes back, that is to say, into the days which I spent – the months and years, even decades – which I spent in India. During that period, which was obviously a very important and impressionable period of my whole life, I was in regular friendly contact with most of the bhikkus who were working for, or were connected with, the Maha Bodhi Society. Some of them were stationed in Calcutta, some in Sarana, one or two in Delhi, Agnow, Madras. I think I was in fairly regular contact, sometimes very regular contact, with practically all of them. And of course, as Dr Vajrajnana also mentioned, for 12 years I edited the Maha Bodhi Journal. Only quite recently in connection with some memoirs I'm currently writing, I was looking through some back volumes, some bound volumes of the Maha Bodhi Journal, and I calculated that several thousand articles must have passed through my hands in those days. I recollect that I was what is sometimes called a ferocious editor. I must admit that sometimes I blue-pencilled about two-third of an article – if anyone was to do that to an article of my own (LOUD LAUGHTER), I would protest vigorously (LAUGHTER), but in those days – well I was young then (LAUGHTER) – I did it with the utmost confidence. And of course in the course of my days in India and my contact with the Maha Bodhi Society's workers, some of the Society's bhikkus, became very good friends of mine. But unfortunately all those whom I knew then, all those who were friends of mine in those far-off days, are now passed on into some other reincarnation. And there's only one Maha Bodhi Society bhikku at present with whom I'm in personal contact, and that is Dr Vajrajnana – he is the sole survivor as it were, and yes, as he intimated, I've known him for nearly 30 years which is quite a big slice of anybody's life. Of course I got to know him not in India, as I did the other bhikkus of the Society, but here in England.

As he has already mentioned, he was present at the very first ordinations into the Western Buddhist Order, one Sunday, morning I think it was, 7th of April 1968 here in London itself. It's this same Dr Vajrajnana who has invited me to speak here today. And it is he who has chosen the subject, the subject of Great Buddhists of the Twentieth Century. Now I don't know what led him to choose this subject, he didn't reveal that to me, he didn't give me any indication of his thinking. But I must admit that the subject is probably not one that I would have chosen myself. After all, it's a really vast subject – Great Buddhists of the Twentieth Century. But Dr Vajrajnana, being a friend of mine, I agreed to speak on this. And I thought in any case as well, why not speak on subject which is not of one's own choosing, perhaps it will stretch one a little bit beyond one's customary boundaries, not to say limitations. So yes, I agreed to speak on this subject of Great Buddhists of the Twentieth Century. So, as my custom is after my acceptance of this invitation to speak on this subject, I started thinking. I usually keep the subject of a lecture or a talk at the back of my mind, and I sort of advert to it at odd moments, sometimes when I wake up in the night, or sometimes when I'm having my daily walk. But I start thinking about it. And not long after I started thinking about this particular subject of Great Buddhists of the Twentieth Century, I realized that I had a problem. And the problem was that once I started thinking about it, there were so many Gbo. Initially, I hadn't realized this. Originally I had assumed that there were just a few, just a handful, but the more I thought about it and the more names I recollected, the more it seemed that there were dozens upon dozens of Gbo, and of course I couldn't possibly speak on all of

them. In order to speak on all of them, I would have to have whole series of Saturday afternoon lectures, and I've just got one Saturday afternoon, just got an hour-and-a-half or so. So obviously I would have to select. But that raises a further problem – how is one to select? On what basis is one to select? What would be the principle of selection? So that was the problem. In the end I decided to base my selection on two principles.

First of all, an elimination. I decided not to speak on any great Buddhists who were still alive, (LAUGHTER), that left me off several hooks (LAUGHTER). After all, even a great Buddhist might change their religion, and then they'd no longer be great Buddhists because they were no longer Buddhists and where (LAUGHTER) and where would that leave me? (LAUGHTER) And of course they might have committed other mistakes (SUBDUED LAUGHTER). Sophocles said "Call no man happy, until he is dead". And similarly one might say "Call no man a great Buddhist, until he is dead". That's the safer way – so that safer way I decided to take. Not to speak about any great Buddhist – question mark possibly – who was still alive.

And then secondly, my second principle of selection, I decided to speak on great Buddhists with whom I had had some kind at least of personal contact.

So in this way, with the help of these two principles of selection, I was able to cut down my list of Great Buddhists of the Twentieth Century, to a quite manageable figure. But then a further question arises, which is how does one define a great Buddhist, what is it that makes a great Buddhist? For, as a matter of fact, how does one define a great man? Well, I'm going to leave the latter question aside. Let's concentrate on what it is that makes, what it is that constitutes a great Buddhist.

Well, in the first place, only too obviously, a great Buddhist has to be a Buddhist – maybe that isn't always realized, so let me repeat it... a great Buddhist has to be a Buddhist. That's the first thing. You can't be a great Buddhist unless you're a Buddhist. The great Buddhist has to be committed per se, by definition, in theory and in practice, to the Three Jewels. He or she has to Go For Refuge to the Three Jewels: to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. To be a great Buddhist, whether of the 20th century or any other century, it's not enough to be a scholar in Buddhism, however learned one may be. One may know Pali, one may know Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese – all of which languages, modern scholars in Buddhism have to know apparently – but one is not a great Buddhist, unless one also Goes For Refuge to the Three Jewels. And it's not enough either to occupy a prominent position in a Buddhist organization. During my time in the East, this was one of the great stumbling blocks for me. I'd come into contact with various Buddhist organizations, meet their secretaries and presidents, and then I'd discover that they weren't Buddhists, and I thought "well, why is it that someone who is not even a Buddhist, can lead a Buddhist organization?" This was a great puzzle to me in those youthful days of mine. And similarly to be a great Buddhist, it's not enough to have been born into an important Buddhist family, not enough for instance to have been born into a Royal Buddhist family, or Buddhist royal family – that also doesn't make one a great Buddhist.

A great Buddhist, I would say, is one who possesses at least some of the characteristically Buddhist qualities to an eminent degree. Not just a little bit of metta, but a lot of metta. Not just a little bit of virya, but a lot of virya. Not just a little bit of prajna, but a lot of prajna. So a great Buddhist, among other things, is one who possesses at least some of the characteristically Buddhist qualities to an eminent degree. Of course, it goes without saying that he or she possesses also the characteristically human qualities to an eminent degree. One can't be a great, or even a good Buddhist, without being at the same time a great, or good,

human being.

And then again, a great Buddhist is one whose life and work as a Buddhist, influences many other people especially many other Buddhists. Thus, the great Buddhist contributes to the making of Buddhist history. The great Buddhist has a place in Buddhist history.

And finally, a great Buddhist is a paradigmatic figure. The great Buddhist provides a model, or an example, for other Buddhists, both during his lifetime, and after his death. He or she functions as a source of permanent inspiration and guidance for other Buddhists.

Now the great Buddhists about whom I'm going to speak this afternoon, are not I would say all equally great – it's not easy to compare them – they're not great in quite the same way, though they are great. And I must also say that I personally don't necessarily agree with everything they said or did or wrote, but they were all undoubtedly great in the sense that I have defined. So it's probably high time I told you who these great Buddhists, about whom I'm going to speak, are. Well, there are 5 of them. I pondered for quite a while whether there should be 7, or 6, or 5, or 4, but in the end I thought well 5 is just the right kind of number. So the five are, first of all Anagarika Dharmapala, secondly Alexandra David-Neel, thirdly B.R. Ambedkar, fourthly Lama Govinda, and fifthly Edward Conze. Quite a bunch huh? (LAUGHTER)

I'm going to talk about them in this same order, which happens by the way to the chronological order, that is to say, the order in which they were born, though not the order in which they died. All except the last, that is to say Edward Conze, were born actually not in the 20th, but in the 19th century, but all five did most, if not all, of their important and significant work for Buddhism in the 20th century. So they can be quite legitimately regarded as being Great Buddhists of the Twentieth Century. Now in speaking about them, I'm not going to give you too much biographical detail. I'm not going to tell you what they had for breakfast for instance, I'm only going to give sufficient biographical information as will enable us to understand their significance, their importance, their meaning, for us today, at the end of the 20th century. 20th century that is to say of the Christian era, this isn't our Buddhist 20th century – we must never forget that. Perhaps I should add a word or two about that. Nowadays of course we hear quite a bit about celebrating the end of the millenium. But it's not our millenium. I mean Buddhists – I remember it very well in 56, 57 in India – we celebrated the 2500th anniversary of Buddhism, the 2500th anniversary of the Parinirvana. So it's not our 2000 anniversary, not our second millenium, and we mustn't forget that, and I suggest that when the Year 2000 comes we as Buddhists find something else to celebrate. (LOUD LAUGHTER & CLAPPING) Anyway, that is just by the way.

So let's come to our first great Buddhist of the 20th century, Anagarika Dharmapala. I have a slight feeling that I'm rather bringing coals to Newcastle here; some of you at least must have heard quite a lot about Anagarika Dharmapala already in the course of your visits to this Vihara. He was born in Colombo, Ceylon – of course it's now Sri Lanka, but in his day it was still Ceylon, so as Ceylon I'll refer to it – he was born there in 1864, and he died in Sarnath, India, in 1933, that is to say he died there in India just 11 years before I myself arrived in India. So, the time that separates us isn't really too great. And I've mentioned that I had some personal contact with all of these five Gbo, and you may therefore be wondering how I managed to have any personal contact with Dharmapala, because he died in '33 in India, I arrived in India in '44 so how was that? But, yes, I could say that I did have personal contact with Dharmapala. I can even say that I lived with Dharmapala for several weeks. Not literally of course, but metaphorically, and that was when I wrote my short biography of Dharmapala which was in 1952. I wrote it in connection with the Maha Bodhi Society's diamond jubilee.

And I was provided on that occasion with quite a lot of material about Dharmapala, and in particular I was able to read many volumes of the Dharmapala diaries. He kept all through his life, almost from his schooldays, a quite voluminous diary, and I had stacks and stacks of these diaries made available to me, and I went through them in the course of writing this biographical sketch. But I'll have something more to say about that a little later on.

Meanwhile, let us get back to the beginning. Dharmapala was born in Colombo in 1864. He was born into a pious middle-class Buddhist family. His father was the proprietor of a furniture manufacturing business. From the time when he was five until the time that he was eight, and again from ten to eighteen, Dharmapala attended a series of Christian schools both Catholic and Protestant. Now some of you may be wondering, well, why Christian schools? Wasn't his family Buddhist, wasn't he a Buddhist, parents in fact were very pious Buddhists, so why should Dharmapala – the future Lion of Lanka as he was called – go to this whole series of Christian schools? Well, there was a reason for that, which was that at that time – 60s, 70s of the last century – all the higher education in Ceylon was in the hands of the Christian missionaries. Since 1802, Ceylon had been a British colony, and between 1505 and 1796, large parts of the island had been ruled first by the Portuguese, and then by the Dutch. And the result was that Buddhism and Buddhist culture at the time of Dharmapala's birth were at a very low ebb in Ceylon. In fact, well you'll hardly believe this, but in fact it was officially not possible to be a Buddhist at all, not officially. Children born of Buddhist parents had to be taken for registration, registration of the birth, to a church, either a Catholic church or a Protestant church, and there they would be given a Christian name, otherwise legally-speaking, they would be illegitimate and not able to inherit property. And this law which had been in force for such a long time was not repealed until 1884. So such were the circumstances into which Dharmapala was born. That's why he had to go to a whole series of Christian schools, and in fact be given – when he was taken after his birth, to the church – a Christian name. His name was David. He wasn't called Dharmapala originally, he was called David, out of the Bible of course for those who don't know your Bible (LAUGHTER), and – well a lot of people don't these days – and he was known as David Hevadidharma [??] – I hope I've pronounced that correctly – David Hevaditarne, the latter being his family name. So going along to these Christian schools, colleges, he had to learn huge chunks of the Bible by heart. It's really astonishing how much of the Bible he knew by heart, because later on the Christians might have wished that they hadn't taught him so much about the Bible (LAUGHTER) because he turned it against them. But he knew by heart when he was still in his teens, four complete books of the Old Testament. All four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – and the Acts of the Apostles. He knew them all by heart when he was in his early teens.

But Dharmapala did not lose his faith in Buddhism, somehow he picked up quite a bit of Buddhism from his home, from his parents, and he used to get into quite a bit of trouble, even as a young teenager, for arguing with his Christian teachers. Well, all young – I was going to say young men – yes, young men, not so much young women apparently, all young men are a bit argumentative, teenagers are a bit argumentative, I think I was as a teenager. But Dharmapala seems to have been unusually argumentative, and he was very fond of pointing out inconsistencies of Christian doctrine, and arguing with his Christian teachers about those inconsistencies. Not only that, as you know the great holiday, the great festival, for Buddhists, the greatest of the year, is Wesak. In Dharmapala's time of course, it wasn't a public holiday, Christmas was a public holiday, Easter was a public holiday in Ceylon, but not Wesak. As a youngster, when he was about 13 or 14, Dharmapala thought "well, I'm a Buddhist. I ought to celebrate Wesak, or to have the day off from school." So, what did he do? He went straight to the headmaster, the Christian headmaster, and said "I'm a Buddhist. I'd like to have tomorrow off from school, because it's Wesak and I want to celebrate". Well, the headmaster

said no, not surprisingly. So what did Dharmapala do? He just took his umbrella, and he walked out of the school and he didn't come back the next day, and he celebrated Wesak. When he did go back to school, what happened? He got a very sound thrashing from the headmaster for daring to play hooky and go and celebrate Wesak. And this happened three years running. Three years running he asked for permission to take Wesak off, was refused, took it anyway, and was thrashed when he went back to school. So, this gives you some idea how obstinate and determined he was even as a very young teenager.

And there's another incident from his schooldays, which is perhaps even more significant. He tells us in some memoirs that he wrote later on in life, that it so happened that one of his school fellows had died. Apparently the body was laid out, the corpse was laid out somewhere in the school, perhaps in the Assembly Hall, and the teachers they invited the students to gather round the dead body, and offer up prayers. So Dharmapala was also there, he did join them. As he looked around, he asked himself a question: "Why are they praying?... why are they praying?" And he looked at the faces of his school fellows, he looked at the faces of the teachers, and he saw that they were all afraid, he saw that they were all afraid of death, and that's why they were praying. And he had a sort of realization that prayer, petitionary prayer, is born of fear. And from that day forth he had no temptation to pray in that sort of way. But one mustn't think that Dharmapala was a rather uppish, argumentative teenager, he was actually a rather idealistic, dreamy sort of person, and he was very fond of poetry. You can imagine that going to these missionary schools, he obtained a very good command of English and he read very widely, and always did read very widely in English literature. And at that time he was very fond of English poetry, and especially he was fond of the poetry of Keats and Shelley, particularly I think Shelley – he read it constantly. He had not only a sort of dreamy idealistic streak, he also had quite marked mystical and ascetic tendencies.

However, things were changing even in colonial Ceylon, and the tide was about to turn for Buddhism or at least to begin to turn. In 1880 Theosophy arrived in Ceylon. It arrived in the persons of Madam Blavatsky, and Colonel Alcott [SPELLING???]. They'd founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875, and they were both very sympathetic to Buddhism or at least to what they understood of Buddhism. And after their arrival in Ceylon in 1875, they both publically declared themselves Buddhists, and they publicly took the Refuges and Precepts from a prominent Sinhalese bhikku, and this created a tremendous sensation in Ceylon from one end of the island to the other, because they were the first Europeans publically to embrace Buddhism. The missionaries were very upset, but worse was to come – that is for the missionaries – because Colonel Alcott took rather a liking to Ceylon... he stayed on, he spent quite a lot of time in Ceylon, and he devoted himself to the cause of Buddhist education, and eventually in the course of quite a number of years, he was responsible for the setting up of more than 300 Buddhist schools, some of which are still in existence. And the youthful Dharmapala helped him in this work. He often functioned as Colonel Alcott's translator. And I believe that people, Buddhists in Ceylon, in Sri Lanka as it is today, are still grateful to the memory of Colonel Alcott, and they still observe and celebrate Alcott Day. Still.

Dharmapala also became quite close to Madam Blavatsky. Originally, in his late teens, he had wanted to study occultism, as so many theosophists did, but Madam Blavatsky gave him different advice. She advised him to study Pali and to work for the good of humanity. So this is what he did. I've no time to mention all his activities at this period, but significantly enough it was at this period that he changed his name. He changed from David to Dharmapala, and Dharmapala of course means 'Guardian of the Dharma'. In 1889 he accompanied Colonel Alcott to Japan, and this was the first contact in modern times, between the Theravada Buddhists of Ceylon and the Mahayana Buddhists of Japan. Two years later,

Dharmapala paid his first visit to the Buddhist holy places of India, and in the course of that visit, in the course of that pilgrimage, he received a great shock. He found that the holy places of Buddhism in north-east India were in a very neglected condition, some of them in fact were no more than just heaps of ruins, because India was no longer a Buddhist country. India had not been Buddhist for several centuries, and what had not been absorbed into Hinduism had been destroyed by the Muslim invaders. In Bodhgaya, the most important of all the Buddhist holy places, the most sacred, where the Buddha had gained Enlightenment, General Sir Alexander Cunningham had restored the ancient Maha Bodhi Temple but there was no one there to look after the place. Dharmapala was profoundly moved, and he tells us that he visited the Vajrasana – as you probably know the Vajrasana means ‘the Diamond Seat’ or ‘Diamond Throne’, the black, carved marble slab that marks the spot where the Buddha, according to tradition, actually sat when he attained Sambodhi, attained Supreme Enlightenment – so, Dharmapala sought out the Vajrasana, he bowed down, he touched the edge of the Vajrasana with his forehead, and as he did so, he was seized with a sudden inspiration. He decided he’d stay and look after the place until Buddhist monks could come and look after it. He was then 29, he had found his life’s work.

But, as he soon found, it wasn’t so easy to look after Bodhgaya and its temple, he didn’t realize that at first. Legally the temple belonged to a Hindu monk, and this monk wasn’t very happy to have Dharmapala there, whether looking after the temple or not. In fact he objected strongly to his presence, and even had him thrown out and beaten up at one point. And this led to a very long legal act, we don’t have to go into all that. But meanwhile, in 1891, Dharmapala founded the Maha Bodhi Society to help him in his work. Initially his work of restoring Bodhgaya to something of its former splendour, and gradually his work of spreading Buddhism in India and even throughout the world, and in 1892 he founded the Maha Bodhi Journal. From this time onwards, he spent quite a lot of his time in Calcutta, which of course at that time was the capital of India, not Delhi – Delhi became the capital much later. He established in fact his headquarters there in Calcutta. In 1893 he was invited to attend the Parliament of Religions in Chicago as representative of southern-Buddhism, as it was then called, that is to say the Theravada. On his way to America, on his way to the Parliament of Religions, he visited England and spent some time there. Amongst others he met Sir Edwin Arnold, the author of ‘The Light of Asia’. Dharmapala had always been a great admirer of this beautiful poem ‘The Light of Asia’ and was very pleased to meet Sir Edwin Arnold, who that time was the editor of The Daily Telegraph, which was then a radical newspaper (LAUGHTER) and Sir Edwin Arnold was always a strong supporter of Dharmapala and in fact of the Buddhists of Ceylon. Arrived at the Parliament of Religions, Dharmapala was a great success, in fact some journalists compared him to Jesus, which I suppose they thought was the ultimate compliment (LAUGHTER). And Dharmapala delivered quite a number of lectures, in connection with the Parliament, and on other occasions, and he attracted quite a lot of attention for himself personally and for what he represented, for Buddhism. And on the way back to India he visited Japan, China and Thailand, and by that time, in his early 30s he was already, we may say, a world figure, at least – at the very least – a figure in the Buddhist world, and he remained one for the next, for the remaining, 40 years of his life. I’ve obviously no time to discuss all his extensive activities during that period. In India he built temples and viharas, rest-houses, in Ceylon he established schools and hospitals, he travelled twice more round the world, he spent altogether three years in America. This is a phase of his career that has not yet been properly documented, but he seems to have given talks and lectures in almost hundreds of different cities and towns in the United States of America, all the time preaching the Dharma. And in 1925 and 1926, he spent some time here in London, and he established the Vihara here, first in Ealing and then in the Regent’s Park area. It seems as though Dharmapala and his successors have always been rather fond of West London.

In 1931, back in India, back in Sarnath, he became first of all a sramenera, in 1933 a bhikku. Both ordination as I said took place in Sarnath, which Dharmapala by that time had greatly revived and where he had built a great new temple. By this time he was a very sick man, confined to a wheelchair, and in December 1933 he died aged 69. Clearly Dharmapala led a very active life, a very full life, but – and this is something very important – he might not have suspected this from what I already told you about his life, but Dharmapala was also a meditator. I've mentioned that when I wrote my biographical sketch, I was able to consult many volumes of his diaries, and I discovered that he invariably started his day, wherever he was, with a period of meditation. And you may be wondering which meditation he did. Well, he practised a meditation which is very familiar to many of us, something very basic, something very important, but which some Buddhists unfortunately do tend to rather underestimate, he practised the metta bhavana – the development of universal loving kindness, and he usually meditated very early in the morning, even before dawn, and he usually meditated it seems for 2 hours. Now he's not found it very easy to find a teacher. In his younger days in Ceylon, he searched for one, but unfortunately for various reasons in Ceylon in those days, the practice of meditation had died out. When he was in his 20s he met a Burmese lay yogi who was able to give him some instruction. So every day thereafter, early in the morning, he'd meditate and direct metta, especially to all the people he knew, to all his relations, his friends, all the people who helped him in his work. And eventually to all beings. So this was Anagarika Dharmapala. The first of our five great Buddhists of the 20th century.

(SIDE 2)

I've dwelt on his life at some length, more in fact than I shall do in the case of some of the other great Buddhists, and I've done this because his life and theirs share, to a great extent, a common background. A background which has two great features. A background distinguished by two great features. First of all the revival of Buddhism in India after it had been virtually extinct there for several centuries, and then secondly the beginning of the introduction of Buddhism to the West. Dharmapala's life in fact was significant in many ways. I'll mention just a few of these. First of all, he was the first Anagarika in modern times. He wasn't a bhikku, but he wasn't a layman in the ordinary sense. It seemed that he took the brahmacarya vow in his 9th year, and he remained faithful to it all his life. An anagarika of course is a celibate, full-time worker for Buddhism. He wore the yellow robe, or rather a yellow robe – not of the traditional bhikku pattern – he didn't shave his head. He seems to have felt that the observance of all the Vinaya rules would rather get in the way of working freely for the Dharma, especially as he travelled around the world. And yes, as I've also mentioned, his life had a background of meditation. He wasn't a Buddhist activist, a sort of flitting from one Buddhist conference to another, it's very important to remember this. It's very important to remember that our work for Buddhism must spring from, and be the expression of, deep experience of Buddhism itself. And this is very difficult to achieve without regular meditation.

Dharmapala also realized the importance of Going For Refuge. This is another thing that I discovered when I examined his diaries. At the top of every alternate page, he wrote these words as if to remind himself of this fact, he wrote: 'The only refuge for him who aspires to true perfection is the Buddha alone'. So this is what he told himself as it were, this is what he reminded himself of every day of the year, year after year. Going For Refuge, as most of us I think appreciate, Going For Refuge to the Three Jewels, is the fundamental, decisive, definitive act of the Buddhist life, it's what makes us a Buddhist, it's what unites us all, whether we are monks or laypeople, male or female, we all Go For Refuge. And then, again this may come rather surprisingly to some of you, Dharmapala was a pioneer of the arts and crafts movement. He did his best to encourage the traditional arts and crafts of Ceylon, which

of course the missionaries certainly hadn't encouraged. And he discouraged imported fashion, in particular he urged the Sinhalese women to wear the sari; he was rather against them wearing Western-style frocks. I don't know what he'd have to say about the present day jeans. In short, he encouraged pride in one's national, indigenous culture.

And of course, Dharmapala was a great pioneer of Buddhist revival in India, as well as being the first Buddhist of modern times to preach the Dharma in three continents: in Asia, in America, and in Europe. Such then was the Anagarika Dharmapala.

Secondly, our second Gbo, Alexandra David-Neel (ADN). If Dharmapala moved from east to west, and then back, ADN moved from west to east and back. She was born in Paris in 1868 and she died in Digne (??) in 1969, so that her life spanned just over 100 years. From the time of the Emperor Napoleon the 3rd in France, to the time of President Pompidou. Just think of it – from the age of acrynaline to the age of the mini-skirt (LAUGHTER), fancy having worn both huh? (LAUGHTER) Well, at least she wore acrynaline, I'm not so sure about the mini-skirt, and she came from a wealthy middle-class French family. Her father was a french Protestant, a socialist and an ardent republican. Her mother on the contrary was a belgian Catholic and a staunch supporter of the Belgium monarchy. Alexandra David, as she originally was, seems to have been very much closer to her father, in fact it seems mother had not wanted a daughter at all. She wanted a son, because she wanted a son who could become a bishop in the Catholic church, so, well even now women can't become bishops in the Catholic church as you probably know, so AND's mother was bitterly disappointed when a daughter arrived and not a son. And Alexandra as she grew up was well aware of this. And she grew up, it seems, something of a tomboy. She was sent to various Catholic converts... sorry convents for her education (LAUGHTER), but it didn't seem to make very much difference, she remained a tomboy. And in fact, believe it or not, from the age of 16 she started regularly running away from home; and don't forget this is during the last quarter of the last century – in England that was the Victorian period, so here is this young lady only 16, 17, from a respectable middle-class family regularly running away on her own. It seems she always came back, sometimes her father had to go and fetch her because her money had run out. And once, believe it or not, when I think she was 17 or 18, she ran away all the way to Spain, she didn't actually she bicycled, in those days all the way to Spain. She also went to Holland, went to England, to Italy, while she was still in her teens, all on her own. And on a second visit to England, she came into contact with theosophy. You see theosophy is popping up again – this is rather interesting. She lived in London with theosophist friends. She had always been a great reader, and she started exploring what we would now call the various alternative traditions. Things like gnosticism, catharism, and so on, mysticism. She spent a lot of her time at the British Museum, and on her return to France she settled in Paris and lived there with a group of french theosophists. She started studying Sanskrit, and she came across Buddhist scriptures. In fact she came across the *Lalitavistara*, as some of you probably know that's the Sanskrit life, rather legendary life, of the Buddha. But this wasn't quite her first contact with Buddhism. She tells us that at the age of 13, she had come across one of the most ancient and beautiful of Buddhist legends, it's a Jataka story, the story of how the Buddha, in one of his previous incarnations, had sacrificed himself literally to save the lives of a starving tigress and her cubs. And this story, when she was 13 years of age, had impressed her deeply, and she thought it the most beautiful story she had ever heard. But in Paris her contact with Buddhism was not just through books, it was also through art, because Paris, as many of you know, is the home of the Guimet, the most famous Oriental collections in the world, and the young Alexandra spent many happy hours there being particularly impressed by the magnificent Javanese Buddha image.

One day when she thought she was all alone, she just joined her two hands together and saluted it, because she already regarded herself as Buddhist, even though she continued

studying other religions especially Hinduism. When she was 21 she of course came of age, and she inherited some money. So she decided that she'd spend this money. She decided to spend it on a trip to India – don't forget we haven't yet reached the end of the 19th century. She decided to go to India, on her own. So off she went, on her own, and after 15 days – she went of course by sea – she reached Ceylon, and she spent a few weeks there, visit her first Buddhist temple. But visiting these first Buddhist temples, I'm afraid she received a great shock, and that was a shock to her aesthetic sensibility, because she found the brightly-coloured modern Buddha-images rather distasteful. 60 years later I myself visited those same temples and saw those same Buddha-images, and I must say I had much the same impression, I wondered – as she had wondered – what had happened to the ancient artistic traditions of Ceylon.

In India Alexander David visited Madras and a Benares and various other places, was entertained by a lot of Maharajas it seems, and in Benares she met a very famous Hindu ascetic, or Swami Bashkarananda. He was a well-known ascetic and yogi. And she discussed with him Western monasticism – he seems to have been rather interested in Western monasticism. And it seems that the Swami was very surprised to learn that Western monks and nuns lived out their lives behind high walls, because according to his idea, well, that wasn't monasticism at all, a monk was someone who roamed about freely and wasn't cloistered within high monastic walls. Anyway, she had that discussion with him.

So she had this trip to India and on her return to Europe she was of course faced by a problem, and that was a problem of financial support, because she had spent her entire legacy on that trip – didn't have any money left – so what was she to do? She didn't want to become involved in the family business, it seems it was her mother's business, and she wasn't making too much money from bits of journalism that she did, so she decided to train as a singer because she had a quite good voice. So she trained as a singer, and she supported herself as a singer for seven years, and had a quite successful and rather colourful career. We won't go into that. (LAUGHTER) And she learnt it seems quite a lot about human nature in the course of those years. And after 7 years, she realized her voice was deteriorating, so again well, what should she do? So in the end she decided, well, she'd just have to get married. She'd always been against marriage, but there didn't seem to be any alternative. So in 1904 she married a frenchman called Philippe Neel. He was a french engineer, and he was of rather aristocratic descent. She was then 36 and he was 40. For the next 6 or 7 years, the two of them lived mainly in french North Africa. During this period her father died, which affected her very deeply, she seems to have been very close to her father. She also at this time wrote and published her first book on Buddhism, which of course she had been studying all this time, and it was called 'Buddhist Modernism and the Buddhism of the Buddha'. But during those years in North Africa she was restless and she eventually decided to return to the East. So she left for the East, for India, in 1911. And she was away for a very long time, she was away for 14 years. She travelled in Ceylon, India, Nepal, Sikkhim, Japan, China and Tibet, and she continued her study of Buddhism. She had many interesting experiences, met many interesting people. Among other people, she met the 13th Dalai Lama, who was then in exile in India, the Chinese having invaded Tibet in those days, and she met him in Kalimpong. Not just a meeting, they had a little discussion. He asked her how she had become a Buddhist. And she said she'd become a Buddhist by reading books, and the Dalai Lama was really astonished because he'd never heard of anyone becoming a Buddhist just.. after reading books. So that's what they had their discussion about.

In Sikkhim she met the famous Gomchen of Lachen, Lachen being an area in the north of Sikkhim. Gomchen means 'great meditator' and he was famous as a meditator and as a yogi. She became his disciple, she spent two years with him or in his vicinity – she practised

meditation, she studied Tibetan, and she also adopted a Sikhamese boy. And this was Lama Yong Den, as he afterwards became, he eventually returned with her to Europe, remained with her for the rest of his life. Some of you may be wondering, well, what was her husband doing all this time? How did he take her prolonged absence? Well, he seems to have taken it very well, he seems to have been very sympathetic and understanding. He sent her money regularly, whenever she needed it – and she seems to have needed, to be frank, quite a lot of money (LAUGHTER), she usually travelled in some style, with a kind of retinue, with quite a few servants and a good deal of equipment. But she seems to have been quite fond of her husband, it seems she wrote to him every day. But she could only be fond of him from a distance. There was one occasion however, when she did not travel in style, far from it. And that was when she made her famous journey to Lhasa – foreigners of course were prohibited from entering Tibet, so she travelled in disguise. She took only Yong Den with her. He was a travelling lama and she was his old mother. The journey took them four months, travelling on foot. They approached Lhasa from the north-east, having spent quite a long time travelling through China. The pair of them crossed vast deserts, they scaled lofty mountains, and their lives were often in danger from bandits, hunger, starvation, landslides – but eventually they reached their destination, and spent two months in Lhasa. And subsequently she wrote that well-known book ‘The Journey of a Parisienne to Lhasa’. It’s interesting – she always thought of herself as a Parisienne, not as a french woman, you notice, but as a Parisienne, even though it seems she also disliked french manners and customs.

In 1925 she returned to France with Yong Den, and settled at Digne in the Alps of Provence. By this time she was quite famous, wrote books, lectured, and paid only one more visit to the East, and that was a bit of a disaster. Because while she was in the East, World War 2 broke out, and she and Yong Den were stranded, were trapped in fact, in south-east Tibet for 6 years. They were trapped in the small town, known in Chinese, as Ha/Cat?? Sien Lu. Some of you may be interested to know that that Chinese town, Cat Sien Lu, is also known in Tibetan as Darsendo??. She returned to Europe for the last time in 1946 – her husband had died. She spent the rest of her life at Digne. Yong Den died in 1955. It was during this last period of her life that I had some contact with her. We exchanged letters. She contributed articles to magazines I was editing, including the Maha Bodhi Journal. I noticed, that even though she was such a very old lady by that time, her handwriting was still firm and clear. She died in 1969 in her 101st year. And like Dharmapala’s, her life is significant in many ways.

Three things I think are particularly noteworthy. First of all, she was one of the first Westerners to take Buddhism seriously, that is to say, to take it as a way of life, not just as a subject of scholarly study. Secondly, there was her readiness to defy convention, especially when it stood in the way of the realization of her cherished ideals. Today of course it’s difficult for us to realize how strong certain social conventions were during her lifetime. We’ve gone now to the other extreme. And thirdly and lastly, she showed, even in those days, what a really determined woman is capable of. So her life is a source of inspiration to all Buddhists, but perhaps to Buddhist women in particular.

Thirdly we come to BR Ambedkar. Anagarika Dharmapala, and ADN, came from wealthy middle-class families. Bingra Ramjee ?? Ambedkar came from the very bottom of the social heap. He was born in Mau ?? in central India in 1891, and he was born into an untouchable, Hindu family. Hindu’s as you know are divided still into castes: the Brahmins are at the top, the Sudras are at the bottom, and you are born into a particular caste, and having been born into it, you can’t get out of it according to Hinduism – it’s a sin perhaps even to try. Untouchables are even lower than Sudras. In a sense, untouchables are outside the caste system, and they are called ‘untouchables’ because any contact with them pollutes other Hindus, that is to say caste-Hindus, even their shadow pollutes. Traditionally untouchables

live in ghettos of their own, outside the village, and they could engage in very menial occupations such as removing the bodies of dead animals, and scavenging, and removing night soil, and they had to serve the villagers, the caste-Hindu villagers in return for a few scraps of food. They weren't allowed to enter Hindu temples, not allowed to attend Hindu schools, not allowed to own property, and they had no economic or political rights. They weren't allowed to better themselves in any way. Once an untouchable, always an untouchable, at least so far as this life is concerned. So that's the traditional system, as it had been in force for 1000 years, and is still in force more or less, and was still in force more or less, when Ambedkar was born.

But even in his day there were signs, tiny signs that the caste system was beginning at least to weaken. I said that Ambedkar was born in 1891. At that time India was ruled by the British, was still part of the British Empire. No doubt this was unfortunate, but for the untouchables at least it did have its advantages, because the British had an army in India and this army accepted untouchables into its ranks. In fact, there were untouchable regiments. And Ambedkar's father belonged to one of these. And in these untouchable regiments, the members of the regiment, the untouchables, were given a certain amount of education, some of them even became school-masters, and Ambedkar's father was one of these – he had become an army school-master, and therefore he was able to help his son with his studies. The young Ambedkar was in fact a brilliant student. In 1908, when he was 17, he matriculated. And he was the first untouchable in India to do so. He was given a scholarship by a liberal-minded Indian prince, he continued his studies, graduated in politics and economics, and subsequently he studied in the West. First at Columbia University, USA, and then at the London School of Economics. He also became bar of law. He finally returned to India in 1923, aged 32.

He was one of the most highly qualified, as well as highly gifted men, in Indian public life. But he had not gained those qualifications simply in order to make money for himself. He'd gained them in order to equip himself to work for the uplift of his own people, the untouchables. He never forgot that he was himself an untouchable, indeed the Hindus did not allow him to forget it. Many continued to treat him as an untouchable, despite his education, and this was a source of great disappointment and bitterness to him. He'd only hardened his resolve to work for the uplift of his people. And he worked for the uplift of his people the remainder of his life, dying in 1956. He founded newspapers, he started schools and colleges, he entered politics, he fought legal battles, he wrote books and articles – in fact from 1932 onwards, the story of his life is inseparable from the story, from the history, of modern India.

In 1947 he became Law Minister in the first government of independent India, and as such he was responsible for drafting the constitution of the newly independent country. He was indeed, we may say, a many-sided personality. On this occasion, this afternoon, I'm only able to give a few highlights of his career from the Buddhist point-of-view. In 1927 came, what is known as the Chowder Tank Case. Chowder Tank was the large tank of the traditional Indian type in the town of Mahaj (??) in what is now Maharashtra State. Untouchables were not allowed to take water from this tank, but in 1927 it was opened to them by the local municipality to whom apparently, this was contested later, it belonged. So Ambedkar held a conference of untouchables in Mahaj, 3000 of them attended, and at the end of the conference, Ambedkar and his followers, marched to the edge of the tank and they took water and drank it. Now we may think that this is nothing, but in the India – the caste-ridden India of those days – this was a terrific thing to do, it was an extraordinary, even a revolutionary thing to do: that untouchables would dare to take water from a tank from which they were not supposed to take water. And there was a furious reaction from the local caste Hindus, some of Ambedkar's followers on that occasion were attacked, beaten up, and not only that, a little

while later, the caste Hindus decided that the untouchables, by drawing water from the tank, had polluted it and it would have to be purified. So how was it to be purified? Well, they called a few Brahmins together. The Brahmins brought together 108 earthenware pots of water taken from the tank. And those pots were then, the water in those pots, were then mixed with curds, with milk, with cowdung, and cow urine – because these are purifying elements according to orthodox Hinduism – and then those pots, the water and all those purifying items, were put back into the tank (LAUGH) and Vedic mantras were recited – in this way the tank was purified, the water was purified. So Ambedkar and his followers naturally regarded this purification as an insult, because the touch of a human being could pollute, but the dung and urine of a cow could not pollute. So, there was a reaction from the untouchable side, and that same year in 1927, what did they do under Ambedkar's leadership, they burned the manushritti (??). The manushritti, or laws of manu, is the sort of bible of the orthodox Hindus – it lays down laws regarding caste: who can eat with whom, who can marry with whom, who can touch whom and not touch whom, and so on. And among other things that it decreed, just to give an example, that molten wax should be poured into the ears of any shudra who dares to listen to the words of the Vedas.

So the burning of the manushritti naturally shocked orthodox Hindus all over India – it symbolized the repudiation by the untouchables of the authority of the Hindu scriptures. Between 1931 and 1933, there was a series of clashes between Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi. Now this might surprise some of you. In the West we tend to look upon Mahatma Gandhi as a rather ideal figure, but I'm afraid in India the untouchables don't quite see things in that way, because Gandhi was by birth a caste Hindu, but he claimed that he represented all Hindus, including the untouchables. But Ambedkar denied this. In fact the untouchables themselves, most of them, didn't recognize Gandhi as their leader, they believed that only an untouchable himself could represent them, only an untouchable could safeguard their interests. And in particular, Ambedkar believed that in a democratic India, there should be separate electorates for the untouchables, in fact all the scheduled??? caste people. He didn't want the untouchables to be governed by caste Hindus. Now Mahatma Gandhi was against separate electorates for untouchables, even though he had already agreed that Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs should have them. So he therefore went on one of his fast-to-death. And if Ambedkar did not withdraw his demand for separate electorates for the untouchables, then well, he'd just fast to death. And in fact he fasted a very long time and his life was in danger, and in the end Ambedkar had to compromise because he knew that if Gandhi died, then thousands of untouchables would die at the hands of the caste Hindus as a result.

During this period – the period of the fast – Ambedkar described himself as the most hated man in India. In 1935 he made his famous declaration, that though he had been born a Hindu, he would not die one. He made this declaration at a conference attended by 10,000 untouchables. By this time he was convinced that the caste Hindus were not going to change their ways, they weren't going to reform, they weren't going to treat the untouchables as human beings. In the same year, Ambedkar's wife died. He was married, by the way, when he was very young – he was 16 and his wife was 9. They had altogether 5 children, of whom only one survived. In 1936, he made a very important speech, or rather he didn't make the speech. He'd been invited to a conference of reformist Hindu organizations, but he would not change the text of his speech – the organizers thought that he was speaking about the plight of the untouchables and the attitudes of the caste Hindus rather too strongly. So the programme was cancelled, and Ambedkar published the speech under the title of 'Annihilation of Caste'. In my view this is in fact his most important work. I consider it even more important than 'The Buddha and his Dhamma'.

It's quite a long speech, even longer than this one of mine. It's in 26 sections. It must have

taken, or would have taken, several hours to deliver it. But it's a brilliant exposition of what Dr Ambedkar and his followers were up against, it reveals much of his mind and his character.

In 1951, four years after independence, Ambedkar resigned from the cabinet because, though as Law Minister he'd been working on the reform of Hindu law, he'd met with fierce opposition from caste Hindus, even those within the government itself, and he wasn't able to complete his work. So he resigned, and it was around this time that I myself became in personal contact with him. First of all through correspondence, and then we had several meetings. At the end of 1954 he announced that he would devote himself, devote the remainder of his life, to the propagation of Buddhism in India. He'd been a serious student of Buddhism for some time. His first contact with Buddhism was when he was 16 when he was presented with the Maharathi translation of Edwin Arnold's 'Light of Asia' – that same 'Light of Asia' that had figured prominently in the life of Anagarika Dharmapala.

And in the course of years, he'd gradually become convinced that Buddhism was the best religion for him and for his followers. He liked it because, in his view, it did not conflict with reason, it did not condone the caste system, it did not condone Man's inhumanity to Man, and moreover it was of Indian origin, it wasn't foreign, no foreign culture came with it. So in 1956 he did actually become a Buddhist, along with 380,000 of his followers. The ceremony took place in Nagpur in central India. And it took place on the 14th of October. Well, today is the 14th of October, so 39 years later, and it's a very auspicious coincidence I think that I happen to be giving this lecture on that very day, 39 years later. I assure you it was a coincidence – we didn't plot or plan this, did we? And when I accepted the invitation, I had no idea that I would be speaking on this particular date, but here we are. The conversions in Nagpur sparked off others all over India. It was the greatest event for Buddhism in India for many 100s of years. Former untouchables felt that they were free. Free from Hinduism, free from the caste system. They felt that they had been reborn. I remember this very well. When I was moving around amongst them – you know months and years later – I used to ask them "What difference has becoming Buddhist meant for you?" and nine times out of ten I'd get this reply, they'd say "Now that I'm a Buddhist, I feel free", and that seems to have been the most important thing of all – socially, psychologically, spiritually, free. That's how they felt.

But unfortunately six weeks after the conversion ceremony in Nagpur, Ambedkar died. He died in Delhi on the 6th of December, at the age of 64, and his death came as a terrible shock to his followers. I was in Nagpur at the time, and I well remember the reaction. They were afraid that the conversion movement would collapse. But it didn't collapse, I myself worked among these new Buddhists for several years, and for the last 18 years, the Trailokya Buddha Sangha - the Indian wing of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order – has been carrying on that work amongst them.

The significance of Dr Ambedkar's life and work is exceptionally profound and far-reaching. How to uplift his people? This was the great problem that he faced. How to uplift them socially, economically, educationally, in all respects? And he felt that they could be uplifted only through a change of religion. He felt it wasn't enough just to leave Hinduism, not just enough to give up the caste system – they had to find another, better, religion. Because Ambedkar, himself a deeply religious man, believed that religion was essential to human life. He believed that Man could not really live without religion, so for him there was no question of pursuing for instance, the Communist option. Dr Ambedkar was very critical of Communism, he believed that real social and economic revolution was possible only on the basis of a spiritual revolution, and he therefore he inaugurated what we now call 'the Dhamma Revolution', which is not just a nominal change of religion, but a transformation of

one's whole life in every aspect – not just individual transformation, but even collective transformation as well. So, this is the great movement that Dr Ambedkar set in motion. He showed, in the midst of the 20th century, that a change of religion could bring about a change for the better in the lives of millions of people, especially when that religion was Buddhism.

Tape 183: Great Buddhists of the Twentieth Century – TAPE 2

(SIDE 1)

The conversion of Dr Ambedkar and his followers to Buddhism, is also of profound significance for Buddhism itself. Dr Ambedkar was well aware that Buddhism had disappeared from India once, and he didn't want it to disappear again now that it had been revived. But why had it disappeared? One of the principal reasons was, he felt, the separation which had developed between the monks on the one hand and lay people on the other. The monks lived together in monasteries, and in the course of centuries those monasteries had become bigger and bigger, housing 1000s of monks, whereas the lay people lived at home. The monks were ordained, but there was no ordination for the lay people. So that very often they didn't feel that they were really Buddhists and therefore they came more and more under Hindu Brahminical influence, especially after the great monasteries were destroyed in the 10th, 11th, and 13th centuries by the Muslim invaders, and eventually the lay Buddhists were absorbed back into Hindu communities – Buddhism disappeared from India, only ruins were left. So what was Ambedkar's solution to this problem?

He decided that there had to be an ordination for lay people, corresponding to monastic ordination for monks, and he called this lay ordination 'dhamma diksha'???. It consisted of two parts. First of all taking the Refuge and Five Precepts, refuge in Buddhism, Dharma, and Sangha of course, and the usual Five Precepts. And then secondly taking 22 vows. Not only that, Ambedkar took the refuges and five precepts from Uchandramani??? – a very senior bhikkhu. But then he repeated himself 22 vows which he had drawn up personally, not traditional vows, he devised these vows and he repeated them by himself aloud at that gathering, after taking the refuges and precepts from Uchandramani. And he then proceeded to administer refuges, precepts, and vows – 22 vows – to his followers, 380,000 of them, and this was highly significant. Ambedkar was initiated into Buddhism by a monk, but his followers were initiated into Buddhism by Ambedkar, a layman. Thus placing the monk and the layman in a sense on an equal footing – both after all, monk and layman alike, Go For Refuge. It is Going for Refuge that makes one a Buddhist, whether monk or layperson that is secondary. So Ambedkar in effect asserted this principle that going for refuge is primary, lifestyle is secondary. But what about those 22 vows? As I said, they were drawn up, they were devised by Ambedkar himself, and they had the effect, they had the intention of completely separating the new Buddhists from their old Hindu religion. In the course of those vows, they explicitly renounced Hinduism: they promised to give up the worship of the Hindu gods and goddesses, to whom very often animal sacrifice would be offered. In other words, those vows made it clear that it was not possible to be a Buddhist and a Hindu. In those days – I remember very well, and probably Dr Vajrajnana remembers – there was quite a lot of people who believed you could be a Buddhist as well as a Hindu. Buddhism was just something added on to your Hinduism, you had a big Hindu temple so to speak and a tiny Buddhist annex. I remember a Hindu monk, a swami, upgrading me, in fact after my ordination as a Buddhist monk, saying "why have you become a Buddhist monk not a Hindu monk?" He said "Hinduism is like the great ocean. Buddhism is such a little tiny stream" and thus was their attitude, so Ambedkar wanted to get it clear, he wanted to make it clear that it wasn't possible to be a Buddhist and a Hindu. Now I've sometimes thought we need something like Ambedkar's 22 vows here in the West, because here in the West some people

unfortunately think that it's possible to be both a Buddhist and a Christian. But personally I strongly disagree with this view, and I think it represents a betrayal of Buddhism, a confusion of thought. But it's time we passed on to our last but one great Buddhist of the Twentieth Century.

(LONG SILENCE) And our last but one great Buddhist of the Twentieth Century, is of course Lama Govinda. Lama Govinda was a rather mysterious sort of figure. We don't know nearly so much of him, as about our four other great Buddhists. We know very little about his early years. He was born in 1898 in Germany, into a middle-class family of partly Spanish descent, and his mother died when he was 3. He was brought up by his mother's sister. Originally he wanted to be a mining engineer, but eventually decided that he was more interested in philosophy. It seems he was particularly attracted by Plato and Schopenhauer, especially the latter. During the First World War, he studied comparative religion but was most sympathetic to Buddhism. Towards the end of the war, he seems to have been called up into the German army, where he spent 2 years, and after the war, he moved to Naples in Italy, then to Capri, that famous island off the south coast of Italy, and this was a very important period in his life. He studied Pali, he took up art, and he became friends with Earl Brewster, an American Buddhist who was a great friend of the famous D.H. Lawrence. In Capri he also met an elderly German lady who became, for the rest of his life practically, his foster-mother, and he also started practising Buddhist meditation.

He not only practised Buddhist meditation, he started making pastel drawings, colour drawings, of meditative states, and in view of his later ideas about the relation between Buddhism and art, this was a quite important development. He also seems to have done some archaeological research in the Mediterranean area. In 1928 he moved to Ceylon, and his foster-mother went with him. He was then 30 years of age. He stayed in Ceylon for several years and studied Pali, and Abhidhamma with the famous German bhikkhu, the founder of the Dodendo??? hermitage, Nyanatiloka, and it was then that he took the name of Govinda. Formerly he'd been known as Ernst Lothar Hoffman. During this period he visited Burma and he did research to cases of alleged recollection of previous lives, a subject in which he was always interested. He also became an Anagarika. His next move was to India.

He attended a Buddhist conference in Darjeeling, and there he came into contact, for the first time, with Tibetan Buddhism, which thereafter exercised on him a very strong influence, in fact he settled in Ghoom, near Darjeeling, again with his foster-mother. This was about 1930. There are not many firm dates apparently in the life of Lama Govinda, but about 1930. In Ghoom he met his Tibetan guru, and this was the famous Tomo Geshe Rinpoche. Subsequently he visited western Tibet where he was greatly impressed, not so much by the religious life as by the vastness of the spaces, by the colour, by the light, by the views. During the next few years, he was based partly in Ghoom, and partly on Santiniketan?? – the forest university which had been established by???? some hundred miles north of Calcutta. He lectured, he wrote, he travelled. In 1939 of course the Second World War broke out, and Govinda in 1942 was interned as he was of German descent. He was interned in a camp near Dehradun???? – conditions it seems were very easy, he studied Chinese, he studied the I Ching, and he enjoyed the companionship of a German bhikkhu called Nyanaponika, another disciple of Nyanatiloka.

After the war he returned to Ghoom and to Santiniketan, and in 1947 he married Rati Petite???? who became known as Li Gotami. She was a former student of his at Santiniketan. She was an artist and a photographer. In 1948 they made their famous journey to Tsarparang?? and they made it just in time – it wouldn't have been possible to make it, for anyone to make it, a year or two later when the Chinese of course... by which time the

Chinese were in occupation of the whole of Tibet. They spent several months photographing ruined Buddhist temples and monasteries, and Li copied some ancient frescoes – they worked under conditions of great hardship. Govinda describes the expedition in his ‘Way of the White Clouds’ – a semi-autobiographical work. Experience of western Tibet in fact of Tibet generally, made a very strong impression on them both – they were impressed by both the magnificence and spectacular scenery, and by the ancient Buddhist art that they discovered. In 1952 he announced the formation of the Arya Maitriya Mandala, which was the organization through which he hoped to spread Buddhism, especially Tibetan Buddhism, in the West.

Shortly afterwards he moved to the Almora in the foothills of the western Himalayas, and he and Li Gotami lived there for the next 25 years or so, and this was probably the most productive period of Govinda’s life – he was at that time, there in Almora, he wrote ‘The Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism’ and also ‘The Way of the White Clouds’. I myself visited Lama Govinda and Li Gotami on several occasions in their hermitage at Almora. We’d previously spent time together in Kalimpong, in Ghoom, and also Deelari?? and we naturally discovered that we had quite a lot in common. Lama Govinda and I had quite a similar approach to Buddhism. In the 60s and 70s, the Govindas paid several visits to Europe and America, by that time there was a growing interest in Buddhism in the West, especially perhaps in America, and both eventually settled there. Their last years were spent in San Francisco – quite a change from Tibet. Lama Govinda died there in 1985, aged 87, Li Gotami died in India about 3 years later. Four days before his death, Lama Govinda wrote his last letter, and he wrote it to me. I’m going to read you two very short extracts.

First of all it says: “I’m a great admirer of Italian art, and like you, I always uphold the importance of European culture. Without knowing the roots of our own culture, how can we absorb the essence of Buddhism?”

And the other quote: “Now it is up to the next generation to take Buddhism out of the merely academic atmosphere, and make it a living experience.” A living experience.

So these extracts give us a clue to the significance of Lama Govinda’s life and work. He always emphasized, in all his writing, that Buddhism was a living experience, that it should be a living experience. He always emphasized it wasn’t just a matter of intellectual understanding or of the observance of rules, he emphasized that Buddhism could be made a living experience by means of meditation. He also emphasized the importance of what he called, creative imagination, and he therefore emphasized the importance of art. He himself was both a meditator and an artist, a painter, he did not see art and meditation as completely different activities. He saw in fact a sort of parallelism between them. In meditation he said, we pass from the world of outward expression to the world of inner experience, and in art we pass from the world of inner experience to the world of outer expression, that is from the point-of-view of the artist. Lama Govinda also stressed the importance of colour in spiritual life, colour in the full literal sense, and he stressed the importance of ritual. There’s much more that I could say about this, about the relation between meditation and art as seen by Lama Govinda, but time is ticking away.

And we have to come now to our fifth and last great Buddhist of the Twentieth Century – Edward Conze. Eberhart Julius Diedrich Conze was born in London – London! – in 1904 of mixed German, French, and Dutch ancestry. His father belonged to the landed aristocracy, and his mother, to what he himself would have called, the plutocracy. His background was Protestant, though his mother became a Roman Catholic in later life. Incidentally he seems to have had a rather bad relationship with his mother, like Madam David-Neel, though

obviously for rather different reasons. He was born in England because his father happened at that time to be German Vice-Consul and of course his mother was there also in England. And he was educated at various German universities. He had a gift for learning languages he tells us, and by the time he was 24 he knew 14 languages, including Sanskrit. He came into contact with theosophy and astrology, and in fact was a keen astrologer all his life, not only believing in it, but practising it and casting the horoscopes of his friends. He wrote a very big book called 'The Principle of Contradiction', this was when he was still a young man, and he tells us that his mother remarked that she was not surprised that he had written such a book, since he himself was a bundle of contradictions (LAUGHTER).

The late 20s and early 30s was a time of the rise of Nazism in Germany, and the youthful Conze was very strongly opposed to the Nazi ideology, so strongly opposed in fact that he went what some people would consider the opposite extreme: he became a Communist, and he joined the Communist party. Not only that he made a serious study of Marxist thought. He doesn't give us too many details, but it seems that for a while he was the leader of the Communist movement in Bonn. Eventually, like so many others of the time and later, he became disillusioned with Communism. Meanwhile, for the remainder of his time in Germany, he actively opposed not only Nazism but the Nazis, and there was a time when his life was in serious danger. In 1933 he came to England. He had taken the precaution of renewing his British nationality earlier, because after all he had been born in England, and he arrived in England when he was 29, virtually without money and without possessions, and he supported himself by teaching German and taking evening classes. And he became a member of the Labour Party, and he became a close friend of Ellen Wilkinson – I don't know whether any of you have heard of Ellen Wilkinson. In her day she was a very famous Labourite – she became a minister of the post-war Labour government, but he got to know her very well, and through her he met so many other prominent figures in the Labour movement. He wasn't very impressed by the Labour party intellectuals – after all he'd been to a whole series of German universities, and he was even less impressed by the trade union leaders whom he met. He also had contact with the India League, this was in the late 20s, early 30s, he met Pandit Nehru, and he met Kushtamenal??, he wasn't very impressed by them either (LAUGHTER). As you can imagine he was a rather critical sort of person (LAUGHTER), and for some years he was very active in the Labour-come-Socialist movement in Britain. He wrote lots of books and pamphlets, and he went about lecturing, but eventually he became quite disillusioned with politics per se, and at the age of 35 – halfway through life – he found himself in a state of intellectual turmoil, and even collapse. And his marriage – he had got married some years earlier – his marriage also by that time had failed.

And in his memoirs he wrote a little bit about marriage, and about women in general, and he wrote that "I am one of those unfortunate people who can neither live with women or without them". But anyway, help was at hand... he discovered Buddhism (LAUGHTER & CLAPPING). He discovered Buddhism, or rather he rediscovered it. He had come in contact, he came in contact rather, with the writings of DT Suzuki, and they were literally his salvation. That wasn't his very first contact, but it was his first significant contact. He tells us that at the age of 13, he'd read 'Gleanings in Buddha Fields' by Loughcody O'Herne?? which some of you may know. I myself read it when I was in my teens. And the headings at the beginning of each chapter of this book, 'Gleanings of Buddha Fields', there were quotations from the Diamond Sutra, so this was quite significant in view of certain later developments in his life. So after this rediscovery of Buddhism, there was no turning back – he devoted the rest of his life to Buddhism, and in particular he devoted the rest of his life to translating the *Prajnaparamita*, or Perfection of Wisdom, sutras – the fundamental scriptures, you may say, of the whole Mahayana movement. But he wasn't just a scholar in the academic sense. During the war, the Second World War that is, he lived in a caravan in the New Forest on his own,

and he devoted himself to meditation, he practised meditation, following mainly the instructions given by Buddhagosa in the *Visudhimagga* very, very seriously and achieved a certain amount of meditative experiences.

(SIDE 2) After the war, he moved to Oxford, he remarried, in 1951 he brought out 'Buddhism, its Essence and Development' – a very successful book which is still in print. But his real achievement in the course of the next twenty odd years, was his translation of the *Prajnaparamita*, or Perfection of Wisdom, sutras. There are altogether more than 30 of these important sutras, large and small. The three most important are the *Prajnaparamita in 8000 Lines* as we say, then the Diamond, or rather Diamond-Cutter Sutra – rather shorter – and then the Heart Sutra, the Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom – this is very short indeed. And it was in connection with his translations of the *Prajnaparamita* sutras, that I myself came in contact with Dr Conze. I started publishing his select sayings from the Perfection of Wisdom, in 'Stepping Stones' in I think it was 1951. In that connection we corresponded, and after I came to England in 64, we met a number of times and we agreed about quite a lot of things. He happened to have reviewed my 'Survey of Buddhism' in very favourable terms (LAUGHTER) which always helps (LAUGHTER).

Dr Conze was one of our great Buddhist translators. He can be compared with Kumaraśreeva?? and Huin Seng??. In the 60s and 70s he visited the United States and talked at several universities, but he did not get on very well in the United States. Well, he'd get on very well with the students, but he didn't get on very well with the university authorities and with some of his colleagues, because he was a very outspoken person. And that was the time of course of the United States involvement in Vietnam, and Dr Conze was very critical of that involvement of theirs. And in that connection of course, his own previous association of Communism didn't do him any good, and he eventually had to leave the States. He died in 1979, and he was quite a complex figure, it is not easy to assess his overall significance. In many ways he was a middle-European intellectual, could even say he was an intellectual of the intellectuals, but he wasn't at all representative because he was very critical of many trends in modern thought. He was a self-confessed elitist, he was rather proud of being an elitist, not the sort of thing that people tend to be proud of these days. He didn't look with any great approval on either democracy or feminism. You can guess that he wasn't very politically-correct, as we say nowadays.

The great divide in his life of course was when he abandoned Communism and politics for Buddhism. So in this way he is representative of the whole pre-war generation that became disillusioned with Marxism in many parts of the West, especially disillusioned with Communism and Marxism in their Russian-Soviet form. Dr Conze himself, by the way, did visit the Soviet Union briefly in 1960 and was almost not at all impressed by what he saw. But unlike many of that generation who took to Communism and Marxism, he was not only... not only became disillusioned with it for various reasons, but instead devoted himself to Buddhism. He placed all his scholarly talents at the service of the Dharma – it's especially significant I think that he tried to practise Buddhism, especially meditation, not just to study it. This was very unusual at the time, we're talking of the 40s and 50s. It was considered even eccentric then – scholars were not supposed to have any personal involvement in their subject, they were supposed to be objective. I had an experience of my own in this connection as late as the 70s. There was a publisher on the Continent – I won't mention in which country – who wanted to bring out a translation of... it was proposed by a reader I think (OR: it was proposed by 'The Reader' I think) that they should bring out a translation of my 'Three Jewels', one of my books on Buddhism. But the publishers eventually decided against it because they said "well, 'The Three Jewels' was written by Sangharakshita, and Sangharakshita is a Buddhist, and he can't be objective about Buddhism (LAUGHTER)". So

they didn't publish it. I afterwards heard that they published a translation of one of Alan Watts' books, perhaps they didn't consider him a Buddhist – well, he's not one of my great Buddhists of the Twentieth Century is he? (LAUGHTER) So Conze was the forerunner of a whole new breed of Western scholars in Buddhism. Scholars but were also Buddhists. Buddhists but also scholars.

So, these are our gbo, or at least some of them. There are many more that could have been mentioned. Well, there was Dr Suzuki, DT Suzuki whom I did mention in passing. There was the great Chinese abbot, Tai Zu??. There was Dr GP Malanasekura?? of Sri Lanka. There was Bhikku Buddhadasa, of Thailand. And there was the great 120 year old Chinese Chan meditation master, the Venerable Chu Hung??. I could have spoken about them, but obviously there wasn't time. And even with regard to my five great Buddhists of the Twentieth Century, I have been able to give only a brief glimpse of them and of their greatness. Fortunately biographies of all five are available. For Dharmapala there's my own biographical sketch, 'Flame in Darkness', written in 1952. For Alexandra David-Neel we have Ruth Middleton's biography with the subtitle 'Portrait of an Adventurer', which she indeed was. For Ambedkar we have Dananjer Keer's?? 'Dr Ambedkar, Life and Mission'. For Lama Govinda there is Ken Winclaire's little book 'A Thousand Journeys' as well as Lama Gonvida's own 'The Way of the White Clouds'. And finally for Dr Conze we have his own 'Memoires of a Modern Gnostic'. He calls himself a 'modern gnostic' because he regarded himself as an elitist, and of course he believed that the gnostics were elitist, so he identified in that sort of way.

And I must say it's very good to read the biographies of great Buddhists. Such biographies can be very inspiring, they enable us to see Buddhism being actually lived. Purely doctrinal studies, good as necessarily they may be, sometimes may give us the impression that Buddhism is rather remote from life, and biographies help to redress this balance. After all, Buddhism began with lives, it didn't begin with books. Buddhism began with the lives of the Buddha and his Enlightened disciples. So I hope that you've been inspired by the glimpse I've been able to give this afternoon of the lives of our five gbo. I must say I enjoyed preparing this lecture. I enjoyed reacquainting myself with these five great Buddhists, and I've also enjoyed giving this lecture.

While preparing it I noticed two things. I noticed first of all that the five were all very different, probably you've noticed it too. They had very different characters, they grew up in very different circumstances, in many ways they did very different things. But they were all great Buddhists. We can appreciate them all, we can rejoice in the merits of them all. And this is very important. It reminds us that though we are Buddhists, that we all Go For Refuge, we don't all have to be the same, we don't all have to live in the same way, we don't have to do the same things, because what unites us is more important than what divides us. What unites us is the fact that we're all Buddhists, that we all Go For Refuge.

The second thing I noticed was that there were certain qualities which, despite their differences, all five seemed to possess in common. First of all single-mindedness – they were all very single-minded. Dharmapala wanted to restore Bodhgaya temple, and revive Buddhism in India. David-Neel wanted to travel and study in the Buddhist East. Ambedkar, in the same way, was devoted throughout his life to the uplift of his people. Govinda's life was devoted to study, meditation and the arts, including writing. Conze spent the best part of his life translating *Prajnaparamita Sutras*. So, once they had discovered their purpose in life, they never wavered. And then they were all characterized by fearlessness. This quality is perceptible in varying degrees in all their lives. David-Neel faced the terrors of deserts and mountains. Ambedkar braved the hostility of the whole of orthodox Hindu India, and so on.

And then there was their unconventionality, they were all unconventional people. Dharmapala lived as an anagarika, not as a bhikkhu, not as a layman. David-Neel lived apart from her husband, though remaining on friendly terms – that was astonishing at that time. And then there was autonomy – they were all autonomous individuals. All five were self-motivated, they did their own thing, they went their own ways, sometimes in the face of tremendous opposition, they were all therefore True Individuals. They were all heroes in the best sense of the word.

Nowadays of course, towards the end of the 20th century, hero-worship, especially Carlisleian hero worship is not in fashion, except perhaps in a very perverted and degenerate form. But we do need heroes in the true, positive sense. We need people to whom we can look up, people on whom we can model ourselves, from whom we can derive inspiration. I was very sad to hear on the radio a few days ago, that in Britain, mention of heroes like Nelson and Florence Nightingale, have been wiped out from some of the school history books. The little ones are just going to be given facts and figures, and of course pocket calculators. Not heroes, not heroines – I consider this a very unfortunate development. So we should not allow ourselves, as Buddhists, to be influenced by this current, fashionable trend. We should consider to cherish our heroes and our heroines, we should admire them, we should celebrate their memories, we should rejoice in their merits, we should realize that our great Buddhists, whether of the 20th or any other century, are among our greatest and most precious possessions.