192: Looking at the Bodhi Tree

Order members, mitras, and friends.

Today, in fact this whole week, as we've just been reminded, we're celebrating Wesak. We're celebrating that is to say the Buddha's achievement, the Buddha's attainment, of Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. It's a day, it's a festival, which is being celebrated all over the Buddhist world. It's being celebrated wherever there are people who like all of us (at least most of us) Go For Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and of course that Wesak day, this Wesak day is being celebrated in so many different ways in accordance with local custom, tradition, belief, culture and so on.

In some parts of the Buddhist world, as I've seen myself, Wesak is celebrated with fairly elaborate processions and pujas. In fact, when I was in India, when I was in Kalimpong, I helped to organise some of these very elaborate processions. I don't think we've had any processions on this occasion, not even in the East End of London (laughter). But perhaps we will if those concerned are sufficiently enthusiastic in the future. But I can remember organising processions with dozens upon dozens of red robed lamas that I'd recruited for the occasion, with their banners of victory and their trumpets. It was usually a very very colourful occasion parading through the streets of Kalimpong. And of course there were the pujas. In many parts of the Buddhist world there are marathon readings of sutras. Sometimes the reading of the sutras (the Buddhist scriptures) goes on for days and even weeks together.

And then of course an event, a way of celebrating which is very, very common and popular in some Buddhist countries, especially in Theravada countries, is the feeding of the monks, which sometimes occupies a very central place in the proceedings. So that even if the monks go a bit short the rest of the year on Wesak they're sure to be well and truly fed.

And then of course, striking another kind of note there are all night meditations. When I enquired up in Birmingham how they would be celebrating Wesak, the chairman informed me that part of the celebrations would be an all-night meditation at the Centre. And then of course we have lectures, we have talks, we have addresses explaining, underlining the significance of the occasion.

But in whatsoever way we celebrate Wesak, the celebration has but one object, which is to remind us of the Buddha's attainment of Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. If the Buddha had not attained Supreme Perfect Enlightenment there would have been no Dharma, no Teaching, no Path leading to that Enlightenment for others. And if there had been no Dharma there would have been no Sangha, no body of disciples treading that path of the Dharma. And if there had been no Sangha, there would have been no Buddhism as we know it, and of course if there had been no Buddhism there would have been no Buddhists and we might go so far as to say that the course of world history would then have been quite different from what it actually did turn out to be.

Not only that, turning from world history to our own personal lives, our own lives would have been very different if the Buddha had not attained Enlightenment, had there been no Dharma and no Sangha. Speaking personally I find it very difficult to imagine what my

own life would have been like without the Buddha, without the Dharma, without the Sangha had I not come across them fortunately at a very early age indeed. So I might even go so far as to say I hardly dare to think what my life would have been like, might have been like without the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha.

So it's natural that we should be celebrating Wesak today, celebrating it this whole week in the various ways about which you've already heard. It's natural that we should be reminding ourselves of the Buddha's attainment of Supreme Perfect Enlightenment.

Now usually, influenced perhaps by some of the books that we've read, influenced perhaps even by some of the Buddhist scriptures that we've read, we usually think of the Buddha's attainment of Enlightenment as taking place, as having taken place at a particular time, and in a sense it did roughly 2500 years ago. But we also tend to think of it as taking place on a particular day, even on a particular night, even at a particular hour, and some might even say at a particular minute when the Buddha at that instant as it were broke through from the Conditioned to the Unconditioned and attained Enlightenment.

But a little reflection, a little further study of the scriptures will show us it that didn't really happen quite like that. Most of you I think will be familiar with the distinction, a distinction about which I've spoken and written on a number of occasions, the distinction between what we call the Path of Vision and what we call the Path of Transformation. Usually we make this distinction between these two paths, the Path of Vision and the Path of Transformation, in connection with the Noble Eightfold Path. And the basic point of difference is this: on the Path of Vision as it is called we have so to speak an experience of the Transcendental, or if you like we have an insight into the true nature of Reality. A profound insight, a deep insight, something that goes far beyond any merely intellectual understanding, and that experience, that insight comes gradually to pervade each and every aspect of our being. It comes gradually to transform each and every aspect of our being. It transforms our body, our speech, and our mind to use the familiar Buddhist classification. It transforms all our activities; it transforms us in fact into a very different kind of person. It makes us wiser than we were before, more compassionate than we were before and this process is known as the Path of Transformation. So we have the Path of Vision [and] the Path of Transformation, and something like this takes place in the spiritual life of each and every one of us. And especially it takes place if we are effectively, effectively Going For Refuge, though (and here one must sound a note of caution) if our Going For Refuge is only effective and not Real as we say, only effective, the whole process, positive as it is, may under certain circumstances be reversed. But if the process takes place when we are really Going For Refuge, that is to say if we've begun to enter the Stream in Buddhist language, then no such reversal can possibly take place. So the same sort of thing we see happening on a very much higher level, a very much more exalted plane in the case of the Buddha. In the Buddha's case there is, so to speak, is a Path of Vision and there is a Path of Transformation. The Buddha's Vision we may say is Absolute. It's all embracing, it has no limits, and His transformation, His transformation of body, speech and mind is therefore total. One might even say it is infinite, and Buddhist tradition therefore speaks of the Buddha as spending seven weeks,

forty-nine days, in the vicinity if the Bodhi tree, that is to say in the vicinity of the tree beneath which as we say He attained Supreme Perfect Enlightenment.

Actually the texts mention in different places nine different weeks. Perhaps in the course of the transmission of the tradition a certain amount of confusion as to the exact number of weeks did arise. But the important point is that in the course of each of those weeks (whether seven or whether nine) something of importance happened. We could say that the Buddha's experience of Supreme Perfect Enlightenment started percolating through, penetrating through, transforming a certain aspect of His being so that by that by the end of the last week (whether the seventh or the ninth) the process of transformation was at last complete. Some of you may remember that in one of those weeks a great storm happened to arise, and the Buddha was sheltered from the rains, so the story goes, by the serpent king Mucalinda who spread his sevenfold hood over the head of the meditating Buddha and in that way sheltered Him. I've spoken about the significance of this particular episode more than once and many of you will be familiar with that.

In another week Brahma Sahampati the ruler of ten thousand worlds requested the Buddha to teach the Dharma for some at least of those whose eyes were covered with only a little dust and the Buddha out of compassion agreed. I've spoken about this episode too.

Today I'm going to speak about another episode which occurred quite early in the seven-week period immediately after the Buddha's attainment of Supreme Enlightenment. According to at least one tradition or source this took place during the second week. So what happened, what happened during that second week? According to the source I've mentioned the Buddha stood at a distance to the north-east of the Bodhi tree and remained for one week gazing at the tree with unblinking eyes as a mark of gratitude for sheltering Him in the attainment of Enlightenment, that's what the text tells us (or one of the texts tells us). And centuries later a stupa was erected on that very spot, the spot where the Buddha had stood, gazing at the Bodhi tree. And it was known, this stupa was known, as `the stupa of unblinking eyes'. And Yuen-Chuang the great Chinese pilgrim saw this stupa in the seventh century of the Common Era and he has described his visit, he has described this stupa in his memoirs, memoirs that he dictated back in China to his disciples in his old age. And Yuen-Chuang says "On the left side of the road, to the north of the place where the Buddha walked is a large stone on the top of which, as it stands in a great vihara is a figure of the Buddha with His eyes raised and looking up. Herein 'foretimes the Buddha sat," (he says sat but the text from which I read a minute ago says stood), "the Buddha sat for seven days contemplating the Bodhi tree."

So why did the Buddha look at the Bodhi tree? Why did the Buddha gaze at the Bodhi tree? Perhaps He didn't gaze literally for seven days, but we may take it that at least He gazed for a very long time and the quotation from which I've read previously makes it clear why. He looked at the Bodhi tree out of gratitude, He was grateful to the Bodhi tree for having sheltered Him in His attainment of Enlightenment, grateful to it for having sheltered Him. And it's about the significance of this looking at the Bodhi tree that I want to say something today. I want in fact to speak about gratitude, gratitude. So far as I

remember I've not spoken on this particular quality before. I'm told that I've given many, many lectures, hundreds even thousands of lectures, and I'm also told that are 18 million words of seminar on tape. It's an awful lot of lectures, it's an awful lot of words, and it's all indexed I'm told.

But so far as I can remember I've never spoken on this quality of gratitude. In a way that's rather strange, but even if you talk in public as much as I've done well perhaps you can't get around to talking about everything. But if the Buddha demonstrated so soon after his attainment of Enlightenment the importance of gratitude then surely we ought to pay some attention to that particular quality. Gratitude surely should be a quality that Buddhists should be trying to develop. So let's look at it a little this afternoon on this Wesak day.

The Buddha also demonstrated gratitude in other ways according to the scriptures. I've referred to the episode of Brahma Sahampati's request, his request that the Buddha should teach the Dharma He had discovered out of compassion, and as a result of that request, yes, the Buddha decided out of compassion to teach what He had discovered. But whom should He teach? The scriptures represent Him as thinking in the first place of His two old teachers, the teachers under whom, according to some accounts, He'd learned to meditate not very long after leaving home. Of course He'd found their teaching inadequate, insufficient, He'd left them, but they had been helpful to him at a particular stage of His career and it's as though He wanted to repay a sort of spiritual debt to them after His attainment of Enlightenment, but He quickly realised that they were dead so He couldn't do anything about it and He then thought of His five former companions in asceticism. You may remember, those of you who've read any account almost of the Buddha's life, that after leaving those two teachers He started practising very extreme self-mortification. He practised it in the company of five friends who became as it were disciples of His and who admired Him, who looked up to Him very greatly because He went further in His self-mortification than anybody else at that time. And of course eventually the Buddha had realised the futility of self-mortification, realised that that was not the way to Enlightenment gave it up, started taking solid food and these other five ascetics of course left Him in disgust. They said "The samana Gautama has returned to luxurious living," because He took a few handfuls of rice to sustain Himself. So after His Enlightenment, having realised that his two old teachers were dead, the text represents the Buddha as reflecting "The five ascetics were of great help to me when I was practising the penances. I wish to preach the Dhamma to them." And this is what the Buddha did. He went to them, He taught them and eventually they too realised the Truth that He had realised, and He did this out of gratitude.

So the newly Enlightened Buddha we may say was a grateful Buddha. Now we don't usually think of the Buddha in this way. We think of the all-wise Buddha, we think of the compassionate Buddha, we think of the resourceful Buddha, but as far as I know we don't usually think of the grateful Buddha. But the Buddha was grateful, and one of the very first things He did after His attainment of Enlightenment was to show His gratitude to those who had helped Him. He was even grateful to a tree! And this alone should give us quite a lot of food for thought, food for reflection, that the Buddha after His Enlightenment showed His gratitude to the tree that had sheltered Him.

In the Buddhist scriptures there are quite a lot of references that show that the Buddha and His disciples didn't regard trees and stocks and stones as just inanimate dead matter. They regarded them as living things; they could have even a relationship with them, they could talk to a tree, they could talk to a flower because yes, there was what they call a devata inhabiting it, and I have said in the past, and this was years and years ago when I was living in India, it's much better to be an animist, a primitive animist, than to think that trees and flowers and rocks and stones are just dead matter. So the Buddha certainly didn't think in that way, and it was because He didn't think in that way that it was possible for the Buddha to be grateful, actually grateful even to a tree.

And it's therefore not surprising that this quality, this virtue of gratitude finds a place in the Buddha's ethical and spiritual teaching. You've probably all heard of the Mangala Sutta, the Sutta of Blessings, or the Sutta of Auspicious Signs as it can also be translated. This particular Sutta which is very short and is found in the Pali Cannon, is often regarded as summarising the whole duty as we may call it of a serious minded Buddhist, and it mentions gratitude, it enumerates gratitude as one of the auspicious signs. If you practice gratitude, if you are grateful, then it's a sign that you are making spiritual progress according to the Mangala Sutta.

So what is gratitude? What do we mean when we use this term? Turning to the dictionaries, which are very useful, very helpful, and to which we should be grateful, very grateful to the great makers of dictionaries. I'm personally very grateful to Doctor Samuel Johnson – his historic dictionary is always at my elbow (at least up in Birmingham; I don't carry it around with me). If I'm writing especially I sometimes consult it several times a day.
Doctor Johnson defines gratitude as "duty to benefactors", and as "desire to return benefits". Coming to more modern dictionaries the Concise Oxford says "being thankful, readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness", and Collins has "a feeling of thankfulness or appreciation as for gifts or favours".

So these are the definitions of the English word, and they're all right as far as they go. They give us some understanding of what gratitude is. But from a Buddhist point of view we really need to go further. We need to look at the Pali word, which we translate as gratitude. And this word, this Pali word is katannuta, katannuta.
So what does it mean literally, this word katannuta? I hope it's a word that in the course of the next few months will be on everybody's lips in the FWBO – katannuta.
It consists of two parts: kata which means what has been done, that which has been done, especially that which has been done to one, to oneself, and the second part is annuta which means knowing or recognising. So katannuta means knowing or recognising what has been done to one, that is to say knowing and recognising what has been done to one for one's benefit. And you can at once see that the connotation of the Pali word is rather different from its English equivalent or its English translation. The connotation of the English gratitude we could say is rather more emotional. We speak of feeling gratitude, feeling grateful, but the connotation of katannuta is rather more intellectual, more cognitive. It makes it clear that what we call gratitude involves an element of knowledge. So an element of knowledge of what? Obviously, knowledge of what has been done to us

or for us for our benefit. If we do not know that something has benefited us, we'll not feel gratitude.

The Buddha knew that the Bodhi tree had sheltered him. He knew that His five former companions in asceticism had been helpful to Him, so He felt gratitude towards them. Not only that He gave expression to that feeling of gratitude, He acted upon it. He acted upon it in the first place by spending a whole week according to tradition simply gazing at the Bodhi tree. And then He went in search of His five former companions of asceticism so that He could communicate to them out of gratitude the Truth that He had discovered. So here there's a very important implication. The implication being that it's natural; it's a perfectly natural thing to feel gratitude for benefits, which we have received. It's a natural thing, a natural response. I'll be going into this a little later.

But of course the benefit has to be recognised as a benefit. If we don't feel that someone or something actually has benefited us, we won't feel grateful to them or to it and this suggests that we have to understand what is truly beneficial, have to understand what has really helped us to grow and develop as human beings. We also have to know who or what has benefited us. We have to remember that they've benefited us otherwise no feeling of gratitude is possible.

In Buddhism traditionally, in the Buddha's teaching there are three principal objects of gratitude. In the first place there's our parents, in the second place there's our teachers, and in the third place our spiritual friends. So I want to say a few words about each of these in turn.

First of all our parents. I think most of you know that I came back to this country in 1964 after spending twenty years uninterruptedly in the East studying and practising {?}and teaching the Dharma. And of course when I came back to England there were quite a few things which had changed, quite a few things that I hadn't been familiar with before, and quite a few things that struck me as unusual, things perhaps I hadn't encountered, at least not encountered to that extent in India. I won't go so far as to say that I suffered from a species of culture shock. But there were some things that certainly did surprise me, some things I hadn't really expected. And one of the things that did surprise me was finding how many people in England, at least among those that I persoonally had contact with, were on bad terms with their parents. I noticed this especially after starting the FWBO in 1967. Now I'm not saying that FWBO people were worse in this respect than others outside the FWBO, it's simply that I got to know them better and they confided more in me than other people and also people coming into the FWBO were more concerned about their personal development. They wanted to straighten themselves out psychologically, emotionally and so on. And of course if one is on bad terms with one's parents then something is quite seriously wrong. Perhaps it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that if one is on really bad terms with one's parents then one's whole emotional life, indirectly at least, is affected, perhaps quite seriously. So I used, even in those very early days to encourage people to get back into contact, positive contact, with their parents if it happened that they were estranged from them for any reason. I encouraged people to be more open with their parents and of course to develop positive feelings towards them. This was especially necessary of course in connection with the metta bhavana, which of course even in those early days was taught, as it still is in all FWBO meditation classes. One had to learn to develop metta, one might say if one wanted to be a little even cynical

even towards one's parents which for some people wasn't very easy, some people had had difficult childhoods. Some people perhaps had suffered in some ways at the hands of their parents, but even so it was necessary in the interests of their own emotional, psychological and spiritual development to get over whatever feelings of bitterness or resentment that they were harbouring. And some people I remember blamed their parents in all sorts of ways for all sorts of things. This sort of attitude is reflected in a well known poem by Philip Larkin. Some of you may know it. It's a rather grim little poem and it's called "This be the Verse" and in this poem the poet Larkin tells us, tells you in rather crude language what he thinks your mum and dad have done to you and he draws quite a grim, even quite depressing conclusion from that. The last verse of the poem reads "Man hands on misery to man, it deepens like a coastal shelf, get out as early as you can, and don't have any kids yourself." What a grim little poem, one might even say what a nasty little poem. In 1995 however this grim little poem was voted one of the nations favourite poems. It came, so I've recently read, 56th in the poll out of a total of 100. It came in between Thomas Hood's "I remember, I remember" and D. H. Lawrence's "The Snake". So this fact that this rather grim little poem as I've called it should be voted by intelligent reading people the 56th most popular poem should give us some food for thought. It suggests that negative attitudes towards parents are still fairly widespread in our society. And Buddhism as it happens, traditional Buddhism, the Buddha Himself has quite a lot to say about our relation to our parents. The Buddha Himself has something to say on the subject in the Sigalaka Sutta in the Digha Nikaya, the collection of long discourses in Pali. And the Buddha is represented there as saying there are five ways in which a son should minister to his mother and father (you notice in Pali it's always mother and father, never father and mother and that isn't without significance), five ways in which the son should minister to his mother and father as the eastern direction: he should think "Having been supported by them, I will support them, I will perform their duties for them, I will keep up the family tradition, I will be worthy of my heritage, after my parents' deaths I will distribute gifts on their behalf."

The same applies in principal of course to a daughter, she too should minister to her mother and father as the eastern direction, she too should think in this manner. Now there's a lot that could be said on the five ways in which one should minister to one's parents, but I'm not going into this now. Many years ago I devoted a whole seminar to the Sigalaga Sutta and I believe this is being edited for publication in book form.

Today I wanted to touch on something even more fundamental, so fundamental that the Buddha Himself in the sutta seems to take it for granted. But it's hinted at in the imagery of the sutta. You may remember that the Sigalaga sutta is so called because it is addressed to a young man called Sigalaga. Sigalaga is in the habit of paying homage to the six directions every morning and he does this in accordance with the instructions of his dying father. But one morning he meets the Buddha, and the Buddha explains the real meaning of this young man's father's words. The Buddha explains that one pays homage to the south by ministering to teacher's in five ways, one pays homage to the north by ministering to friends and companions in five ways, similarly one pays homage to the east by ministering to one's parents in five ways. But why the east? Why the east in the case of one's parents? Well the reason is perhaps obvious. Well the sun rises in the east,

the sun has its origin in the east so to speak and similarly we owe our origin to our parents, leaving aside of course questions of karma of which perhaps the parents are only instruments. If it were not for our parents we would not be here now. Our parents have given us life, they've given us a physical body, have given us a human body and in Buddhism the human body is regarded as being a very precious thing indeed. It's precious because it's only in a human body (whether male or female) that one is able to attain to Enlightenment. So in giving us a human body our parents are therefore giving us the possibility of attaining Enlightenment and we therefore should be very grateful to them, even intensely grateful, especially if we're actually practising the Dharma.

Not only do our parents give us a human body, they bring us up, well as best they can despite Larkin. They enable us to survive, they educate us, they may not always be able to send us to university and all that, but they teach us to speak, they teach us a language, and this is the basis of most of the things that we subsequently learn. Usually of course it's our mother who teaches us our first words and it's for this reason that we have the expression in English at least our mother tongue. It's through our mother tongue that we have access to all the poetry and literature in that particular language which we learn in our earliest days. We can enjoy that literature fully because it's in our own mother tongue, and not in a language we learn in later life.

Not everybody of course cares to acknowledge their debt to their parents, not everybody unfortunately is grateful to their parents. The classic example of this in my view in English literature is that character Mr Bounderby in Charles Dicken's Hard Times. I don't know how many of you have read Hard Times; it happens to be one of my favourite Dickens novels, and it has been made into a TV film which I saw several Christmas's ago. Mr Bounderby is a successful industrialist and he likes to think of himself as a totally self-made man and he's very fond of telling everybody that he is a self-made man. He tells them this on every possible occasion and at great length, he describes in vivid detail how he was abandoned by his mother, how he was beaten by a drunken grandmother, how he lived in the gutter as a child quite literally and had to fend for himself, he describes how nobody'd ever helped him and he'd made his own way in the world and become a rich man and an industrialist entirely by his own efforts. In the course of the novel it turns out that all this is completely false. In fact he had a loving mother who brought him up carefully and educated him and helped him as much as she possibly could. The mother in fact is still alive, but he keeps her at a distance away in the country somewhere and won't allow her to visit him. In other words Mr Bounderby is a monster of ingratitude.

But why are people so ungrateful? This is something I'll go into later on.

Meanwhile, let us turn to the second of the three principle objects of gratitude in Buddhism, that is to say our teachers. By teachers in this connection I mean our secular teachers. I don't mean here our Dharma teachers, I mean all those from whom we derive our secular education, even secular culture.

Here our school teachers have obviously an important place. From them we derive the rudiments of such knowledge, such learning as we have, and we therefore have to be grateful to our teachers. The fact is we've found out very little of what we know or what we think we know for ourselves, as a result of our own efforts. Practically everything that we know or think we know has been taught us in one way or another. If we think of our knowledge of science, our knowledge of history for example, then few of us have even

performed a single scientific experiment or discovered even a single historical fact which no-one else had discovered. All our work in this field so to speak has been done for us by others. We have benefited from their efforts. Our knowledge we may say is little more than the echo of theirs. And I'm not just thinking of living teachers. We also learn from books. We learn from people who have been dead for hundreds even thousands of years. We learn from the writings that they've left, from the records of the words that they spoke, so to all of them too we should be grateful.

Moreover it's not just a question of our learning from them in a purely intellectual sense. Not just a question of our acquiring information. Among those books, those books that we read are great works of the imagination. There are great poems, great novels, great dramas, and these works are a source of infinite enrichment. We would be immeasurably poorer without them. They help us deepen our vision, they help us enlarge our vision. So we should be grateful to the great men and women who have produced them.
We should be grateful to Homer and Virgil, Dante and Milton, grateful to Aeschylus and Caledasa (?) and Shakespeare and Goethe. Grateful to Cervantes, Jane Austen, Dickens, Doestevsky and hundreds of others. Grateful to all of them and writing in so many different languages, so of them have influenced us more than we can possibly realise.

Recently the American critic Harold Bloom has gone so far as to claim that Shakespeare is the creator of human nature as we know it today, which is a very big claim indeed but he gives his reasons for it.

But I don't want to give you the impression that we learn only from books or that we learn only from the great writers. Our experienced is deepened and our vision enlarged by the visual arts and by music. The great painters and sculptors, the great composers are also among our teachers. They too have enriched our lives and to them too we should be grateful. If I don't actually mention any names in this connection, it's because there are simply too many to choose from, both ancient and modern, eastern and western. It's certainly not because I think that the great artists and the great composers are less important than the great poets, novelists and dramatists.

So it should be obvious by this time what I mean by our teachers in this connection. I mean all those who between them have created our collective cultural heritage. Without that heritage we would not be fully human. So we should be grateful to the great artists, poets and composers. We should remember what we owe to them. We should not only enjoy their work, we should celebrate their memory, share our enthusiasm for them with our friends.

So much for then for the second principle object of our gratitude, our teachers. We come now to the third and last, that is to say our spiritual friends. But before I go on to speak about them, I want to make a general point. I've spoken of three principle objects of our gratitude. But we should not think that they're completely separate and distinct one from another. There are not mutually exclusive. There's a certain amount of overlap between the first and second, and between the second and third. Our parents are also our teachers to an extent. In Buddhist tradition parents are called paranacaryas which means ancient

or former teachers because they're the first teachers that we had, even if they only teach us to speak a few words and consequently we're grateful to our parents. Not only for giving us life but also for giving us at least the rudiments of knowledge. For initiating us into at least the beginnings of the basic cultural heritage.

Similarly there is a certain amount of overlap between teachers and spiritual friends. The very greatest poets, artists and composers can help us rise to spiritual heights. They can inspire us with spiritual values. In the course of the last few hundred years, great changes have taken place, at least in the West. Previously, Christianity as represented by the church, or churches was the great bearer of spiritual values, even the sole bearer of spiritual values. But many people have lost faith in Christianity, lost faith in the church or churches and they look elsewhere for their spiritual values. They find those values in great works of art. They find them in the plays of Shakespeare, they find them in the poetry of Wordsworth, Baudelaire and Rilke. Find them in the music of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. Find them in the great painters and sculptors of the Italian Renaissance. These great masters become, as it were, our spiritual friends, especially if we remain in contact with them and with their work over a period of many years. We learn to admire them, to love them. We feel intensely grateful to them for what they have given us. They are among our spiritual friends in the broadest sense.

But now let us come to our spiritual friends proper as we may say. The third principal object of our gratitude, spiritual friends. So here too as in the case of the word gratitude we have to go back to the Sanskrit word behind the English equivalent. The Sanskrit word or words is kalyana mitra. So when I speak of spiritual friends I mean kalyana mitras. Mitra comes from the word maitri or metta in Pali, and maitri means the strong, unselfish, active love. It is sharply distinguished in Buddhist tradition from prema, the Pali pema in the sense of sexual love or attachment. A mitra or friend in this sense therefore means one who feels a strong unselfish active love towards one.

But what does kalyana mean? Firstly kalyana means beautiful, charming, and secondly it means auspicious, helpful, morally good. Thus kalyana mitra has a much richer connotation than the English spiritual friend.

So who are spiritual friends in the sense of kalyana mitra? They are all those who are more spiritually experienced, even spiritually more advanced, very much more advanced than we are. The Buddhas of course are our spiritual friends, especially Shakyamuni Buddha, who discovered and taught the Dharma in this aeon. The Arahants and the Bodhisattvas are our spiritual friends. The great Buddhist teachers of India and China, of Tibet and Japan are our spiritual friends. The figures on the Refuge Tree are our spiritual friends. Those who teach us meditation are our spiritual friends. Those with whom we study the scriptures are our spiritual friends. Those who ordain us are our spiritual friends and all these spiritual friends should be the object of our intense, heartfelt gratitude. We should be even more grateful to them than we are to our teachers. Why?

It's because from our spiritual friends that we receive the Dharma. We've not discovered the Dharma, we've not invented the Dharma, we've received it as a free gift. We've received it from our spiritual friends, from the Buddha downwards.

In the Dhammapada the Buddha says "The greatest of all gifts is the gift of the Dharma. And the greater the gift, the greater the gratitude that we should feel. We should not only feel that gratitude, not only feel it in our hearts, we should give expression to it in words and deeds. And how do we do this? We give expression to it in three ways. By singing the praises of our spiritual friends, by practising the Dharma they have given us and by passing on that Dharma to others to the best of our ability.

The greatest of our spiritual friends is of course the Buddha, the Buddha Shakyamuni or Gautama the Buddha, who as I've said discovered or re discovered the path that we as Buddhists follow today. It's to him that we Go to Refuge, it's the Dharma taught by him that we try to practice, and it's with the support of the Community or Sangha founded with Him that we enjoy as we try to practice the Dharma and we are therefore intensely grateful to Him. More grateful to Him in principle than to anyone else. Our parents have indeed given us life but what is life we may say without the gift of the Dharma. Our teachers have given us knowledge, education and culture but what are these things even without the Dharma.

So we are intensely grateful to the Buddha. That is why we worship the Buddha, that is why we perform the Sevenfold Puja, and that is why we are celebrating Wesak, the celebration of the Buddha's Enlightenment, today and in fact this whole week.

But people don't always find it easy to be grateful, don't find it easy to be grateful to parents or teachers or even to their spiritual friends, if they have them. Some people seem to find it very difficult, so why is this? What's the reason for the difficulty that they seem to experience? I want to go into this just a little before we close. After all gratitude is an important quality, an important spiritual quality, an important virtue. It's a quality that was exemplified by the Buddha. The Buddha as we've seen was grateful to the Bodhi tree. He was grateful to his former companions in asceticism, and not only that. Gratitude featured in His teachings. It featured in the Mangala Sutta and elsewhere. So evidently it's a very important ethical and spiritual quality. Cicero the great Roman orator and philosopher says somewhere that gratitude is not only the greatest virtue, but even the mother of all the rest. The mother of all the rest. Ingratitude therefore represents a very serious defect. On one occasion the Buddha said that ingratitude was one of the four great offences deserving of niraya. Niraya in the sense of rebirth in a state of suffering. So that's a very serious, a very weighty statement on the part of the Buddha. That ingratitude is one of the four great offences deserving of niraya, or downfall into inferior, painful states of existence.

So why are we ungrateful? Why are we ungrateful to our parents, ungrateful to our teachers, ungrateful to our spiritual friends? One would have thought that as Buddhists we would have been simply bubbling over with gratitude to all these people.

A clue perhaps is to be found in the Pali word which we render as gratitude. As I've said this is katannuta. As we saw katannuta means knowing or recognising what has been done. That is to say what has been done to one or for one for one's benefit. So similarly akatannuta, a- being the negative prefix, or ingratitude means not knowing or recognising what has been done for one, or done to one in the positive sense, for one's benefit.

So why is this? Well, there are a number of reasons an I will touch briefly on four of the more important reasons and then say, also briefly, something about the reasons for ingratitude in connection with the spiritual life.

The four most important general reasons for ingratitude are
1. Failure to recognise a benefit as a benefit
2. Taking benefits for granted
3. Egotism
4. Forgetfulness

So first of all, failure to recognise a benefit as a benefit. I hope this isn't beginning to sound too scholastic with all these subdivisions but it is important. So failure to recognise a benefit as a benefit. There are some people who do not regard life itself as a benefit. Hence they don't feel grateful to their parents for bringing them into the world. Sometimes they say things like "Well I didn't ask to be brought into this world". Well if you believe in karma and rebirth this isn't quite true . But anyway this is what people say and in a few cases they may not regard life as a benefit because they feel it is painful, even predominantly painful. They therefore, or more often we may say, don't regard it as a benefit because they don't appreciate it's value. They don't realise the immense potential of human life. In Buddhist terms they don't realise that it is possible for a human being, and only for a human being, to attain enlightenment or at least to make some progress in that direction.

similarly there are people who don't regard knowledge or education or culture as benefits. So they feel no gratitude towards their teachers, that is toward those who at least try to teach them something. They may even feel resentment. They may feel that something called education or culture is being imposed upon them. Such people are unlikely to come into contact with spiritual values. Unlikely to come into contact with the Dharma and unlikely to come into contact with spiritual friends. Or even if they do come into contact with them such contact will be external and superficial. They will not be able to recognise them for what they are. They may even see their spiritual friends or those who try to be their spiritual friends as enemies, and therefore the question of gratitude will not arise.

We mustn't think, we mustn't be under the impression that all those people who heard the Buddha speak, or teach, felt grateful to him. There were many people in the Buddhas day who didn't see the Buddha as the Buddha. They saw him as a rather eccentric, unorthodox teacher, and they certainly didn't feel any gratitude towards him for the gift of the Dharma. Sometimes they slandered him and on some occasions they even tried to kill him.

Secondly, taking benefits for granted. Here we recognise benefits as benefits, we even recognise that we have been given them by other people. We recognise that we owe them to other people. But we do not realise that those benefits are a free gift so to speak. We do not recognise, we do not realise that those benefits have been given to us. We think that they are owed to us. We think that we have a right to them and we think therefore that they belong to us already, as it were. So, we've no need to be grateful, theres nothing to be grateful for.

This attitude is, ofcouse, very widespread in society today, in all sorts of ways. People tend to think that everything is due to them, think that they have a right to everything. Parents, teachers, the state have a duty to provide them with whatever they want. Even spiritual friends, they may think, have a duty to provide them with what they want. And if they don't get what they want from one spiritual friend, one teacher, one guru and get it quickly in the way that they want, well, off they go and try and get it from some other. Once again the question of gratitude doesn't arise. I'm not ofcourse saying that parents and teachers and so on should not do their duty. I'm not saying that they should not bestow benefits to the best of their ability. What I'm saying is that those benefits should be recognised as given. I'm saying that the response to them should therefore be one of gratitude.

And then egotism. Inwhat way is egotism a reason for ingratitude. Egotism has many forms, it has many different aspects. In this respect I mean an attitude of chronic individualism. The belief that one is separate from others, that one is not dependent on others in any way, not really. That one does not owe anything to others. That one is not obliged to them. That one can do everything oneself. Dickens' Mr Boundabee is ofcouse a good example of this sort of attitude. But there are others, other examples in literature. The Satan in Miltons' "Paradise Lost". Theres Black Salvation as he was called in the life and liberation of Padmasambhava. The person who is egotistical in this sense is incapable of feeling gratitude. He or she does not admit that they have been benefitted by others. They may not actually say so like Mr Boundabee does, but this is their real, their underlying attitude, and this attitude sometimes finds expression in the sphere of the arts.

Some writers and artists these days don't like to think that they owe anything to their predecessors. They want to be completely original, to strike out on a completely new path. they don't like to think theres such a thing as cultural heritage. They don't like to think that there is such a thing as a literary Canon. In some circles, especially the United States, This attitude has taken an extreme, even a virulent form. It's resulted in an attempt to repudiate the greater part of our literary and artistic heritage on ideological grounds. This is an extremely unfortunate development and one that could even be disastrous. Therefore it is to be resisted where ever possible.

Egotism in the sense in which I'm using the word in the present connection, also finds expression in the sphere of religion. It happens when we don't acknowledge the source or sources of our inspiration, or when we try to pass off as our own, a teaching og a practice that we have infact learnt from our spiritual frinds.

Let me come now to the fourth and last reason for general ingratitude and that is forgetfulness. There are two main reasons for this forgetfulness of ours. That is to say our forgetfulness of benefits received.

First of all, of course, there's the passage of time. Perhaps the benefits were given us a long, long time ago. So long ago in fact that we have no distinct recollection of them anymore. So that we no longer feel gratitude to the person or persons who bestowed those benefits upon us, even if we did originally feel gratitude to them. This is perhaps the principle reason for our not feeling gratitude towards our parents, at least not actively grateful. Over the years so much has happened in our life, early memories have been overlaid by later ones. Other relationships have assumed importance in our lives. Perhaps we've moved away from our parents geographically or socially and culturally as well. So we forget them practically speaking. We forget the numerous ways in which they benefited us, when we were young, when we were small, and we cease therefore to actually feel grateful.

Secondly, we do not feel the positive effects of the benefits very strongly in the first place. So the original feeling of gratitude is not very strong, and it's easy, therefore for it to fade away and be forgotten altogether.

These then are the four most important general reasons for ingratitude. Failure to recognize a benefit as a benefit, taking benefits for granted, egotism, in the sense in which I've defined it and forgetfulness. The reasons in that they play a part in varying degrees in all cases of ingratitude, whether in respect of parents, teachers or spiritual friends. In respect of spiritual friends perhaps the most common cause of ingratitude is, simply, forgetfulness and this brings me to the reasons for ingratitude in the spiritual life and therewith to my conclusion.

When I speak of ingratitude in connection with the spiritual life, I'm speaking of ingratitude on the part of those who do go for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, whether provisionally or effectively. Those who go for refuge in the Real sense, in the technical sense in which I usually use that expression, they of course will be incapable of ingratitude. They will infact be overflowing with gratitude, gratitude to parents, to teachers, to spiritual friends and so on.

In dealing with gratitude in the spiritual life I want to come down a little to earth. So far I've dealt more or less with generalities, but I now want to be just a little more specific.
I want to come closer to our own experience, closer especially to the experience of those who go for refuge, or are thinking of going for refuge provisionally or effectively within the context of the FWBO.

Over the years, over the 32 years that have passed now since the FWBO was started, I've received many, many letters, perhaps even thousands of letters, especially letters from people who have recently discovered the Dharma, people who have recently made contact with the FWBO. Made contact with our centres, made contact perhaps just with individual order members and every year I receive more and more of these letters. They

come from people in many different walks of life, from many different cultural backgrounds, many different nationalities. They come from young people, they come from old people and all these letters say, among other things, one and the same thing. They say how glad they are to have discovered the Dharma, how glad they to have made contact with the FWBO. Not only that, the writers of the letters want to express their gratitude. Not only their gratitude to the Three Jewels but also their gratitude to the FWBO and to Me, personally, for having founded it and some people express their feeling of gratitude very, very strongly indeed. They say, in some cases, that the Dharma and the FWBO have changed their lives. They've given their lives meaning, they've saved them from despair, even in a few cases they say saved them from suicide.

So these letters of gratitude reach me nearly every week. Sometimes I get several of them in one and the same week and they make me think that I've not altogether wasted my time during these 32 years. But over the years I've also noticed something. I've noticed that some people stay grateful. Perhaps the majority do, even the vast majority. They stay grateful, they may even become more and more grateful, especially those whose going for refuge is truly effective.

In the cases of a few people, however, unfortunately the feeling of gratitude weakens. They start forgetting the benefits they've received. They perhaps even start questioning whether they really were benefits at all. In a word they become AKATANNUTA. They nolonger know, or recognize what has been done for them. They become, in English, ungrateful. Ungrateful to their spiritual friends, they may even start finding fault with their spiritual friends, criticizing their spiritual friends and this is a very sad state of affairs indeed and in recent years I've given some thought to it. I've wandered how it comes about and I've recently come to certain conclusions. In a word such people forget the benefits they received because they no longer actually feel them. They no longer feel them because for one reason or another they've put themselves in a position were they cannot receive them. Let me give a concrete example. Suppose you've started attending a meditation class. You learn to meditate, you achieve some success. You start practicing at home. But one day, for one reason or another you stop attending the class and then you gradually stop practicing at home. You cease to meditate. Eventually you'll forget what the meditation or meditative experience was like. You forget the peace, you forget the joy that you felt. You will forget the benefits of meditation. So you will cease to feel gratitude to those who introduced you to the practice.

The same thing can happen with regard to retreats. The same thing can happen with regard to Dharma study or even with meeting and spending time with spiritual friends, or taking part in Pujas or even joining in the Wesak celebrations. People can get out of touch. They can forget how much or greatly they did, once upon a time, benefit from those activities and therefore they can cease to feel grateful to those who made the activities possible in their case.

Sometimes of course people do reconnect after a while. They start perhaps attending the meditation class again or they go on retreat again, perhaps after years. I've known even quite recently people coming and re-establishing contact, reintroducing themselves after

anything up to 22 years, and that's rather a long time in anybody's life, even mine. When that happens, when they reconnect, when they take up meditation again or go on retreat again or take up Dharma study again, they nearly always say the same thing. They say "I had forgotten how good it was". I've heard this little phrase many and many a time. "I had forgotten how good it was" and therefore they feel renewed gratitude.

So, let us be grateful, let us feel gratitude. Let us know and recognize the benefits we have received. Let us be grateful to our parents with all their admitted imperfections of course. Parents are not perfect any more than children are. Let us be grateful to our teacher and grateful to our spiritual friends and grateful to our Buddhist tradition.

Above all, let us be grateful to the Buddha. Let us remember the Buddha. Remember him on this day, remember him on this week especially. Let us remember in particular that the Buddha, whose attainment of enlightenment we are celebrating, was a grateful Buddha. Let us remember how, out of gratitude, He spent the second week after the attainment of supreme, perfect enlightenment simply looking at the Bodhi tree.