

312: Sangharakshita: Poetry Reading (Women's Order Convention 1999)

[This was a poetry reading. The poems are not transcribed here but are available in other publications. Two unique poems are transcribed here]

Well, here I am materialising again and I must say I am very glad to be here. Even though I have been meeting people for meals I hadn't realised that there were quite so many of you but obviously the more the better and others will be joining us in a few days' time.

Sometimes I wonder whether people haven't heard too many poetry readings of mine, but usually they tell me, or even you tell me, that yes they would like yet another one, so here we are, another poetry reading by Bhante.

Yes, I have made this particular selection especially for this occasion. It isn't a selection that I've read before, but I must admit that I haven't been able to make it specially relevant to women. I must say I did try. I sort of looked through my complete poems and I thought, 'Well now, which poems are specially relevant to women?' and I couldn't find any that were relevant to women without being relevant to men, or relevant to men without being relevant to women, so in the end I just made a new selection, so it's that new selection which you're going to hear this afternoon.

I'm going to read a total of some 13 poems. Some of them are quite old, written believe it or not more than half a century ago, and others are quite recent, written just a year or so ago. Some therefore are poems written in India, others are poems written here in the West. So it is a quite varied selection and we're going to start with what I think is a favourite poem - at least, it's a favourite of mine - and though I did write it more than fifty years ago, I remember the circumstances under which I wrote it very well indeed. I wrote it of course in India and I wrote it in a little Hindu ashram-cum-temple where I was staying, and I happened to be living there at least for a short time on my own. And I found the atmosphere of that place, which was quite isolated on the outskirts of a village, very conducive to meditation. So one evening this poem - I think it must have been after a period of meditation - came to me. And I've subsequently realised that actually it does give a complete account of meditation, and I hadn't realised it at the time. It speaks about the place which is suitable for meditation, it speaks about preparing for meditation, it speaks about what one experiences at least sometimes in the course of meditation, it speaks about the effects of meditation, and it speaks about the results of meditation in everyday practical life, all within the space of four verses of three lines each! So just listen carefully!

A couple of years ago in Berlin I actually gave a running commentary on this poem, verse by verse, and in so doing gave a complete course in the theory and practice of meditation! So yes, you will need to listen carefully! So here we are.

Meditation

So that is perhaps something to reflect on. This is one of the few among my own poems that I know by heart and I must admit that sometimes I just sort of recite it to myself before I start meditating and I find it does, yes, put me in the mood!

Well, that poem was written in the course of my wandering life. The next one was written a few years later when I was living in Kalimpong. And I was living, at the time I wrote this poem, at a little place called The Hermitage. It was just a very simple wooden structure and it looked out on the main road leading into Kalimpong town from Testa (?) Bridge. And twice a week people would come up from the Testa Bridge area up those eight or nine or ten miles to Kalimpong to market. They'd come twice a week. They'd come bringing things for sale, usually vegetables, crops of various kinds, and buffaloes. I'm afraid the buffaloes were for slaughter because the local people weren't vegetarians. So I'd see these herds of buffaloes being driven up the road to market, every market day practically, so one evening I wrote this poem and called it '**Buffaloes Being Driven to Market**'.

Here's another poem written as a result of looking out of the window of the Hermitage. This one has a sort of ecological interest. It's called 'The Charcoal Burners'. The principal cooking fuel in Kalimpong was charcoal, so where did the charcoal come from? It came from down below, it came from the plains, it was burnt by charcoal burners in the forest there and they'd bring it up to Kalimpong town, usually again on market day, or before market day, in baskets usually, tokris (?) on their backs, hmm, but of course this meant that the forests were being depleted, so this is where the ecological interest comes in. I remember I used to warn my Nepalese friends in Kalimpong that if you go on cutting down all these trees you're going to have more and more landslides. And sure enough, they have had. And not so many years ago there was a very, very serious series of landslides, landslips, in Darjeeling as well as in Kalimpong, and a number of people were killed, including an old friend of mine, an English Buddhist nun, who'd lived there in Darjeeling in a hut on a hillside for many, many years. So at this point the charcoal burners reflect that kind of situation. So, '**The Charcoal Burners**'.

Here's a poem written a little earlier, still in Kalimpong, at the Hermitage, or maybe not at the Hermitage, maybe it's a little before that even. It reflects a sort of mood. Several of these poems are going to express various moods. You mustn't forget that Bhante was very young at that time - this is of course to remind you nearly fifty years ago! - so he was sometimes subject to changing moods! And this little poem represents a sort of mood that I think most of us experience from time to time when we want something but we can't have it! We want something, perhaps something which is very beautiful, very fine, very ideal, whatever it may be, but we can't have it, so there's a certain sort of wistfulness about our feeling. So this poem is about that sort of mood, or tries to capture that sort of mood, and it's called '**Inaccessible**'.

I think I'll read that again because I spoiled the last bit, so wipe it away, wipe it off the tape! I'll do it again. It's not a bad little poem anyway! **'Inaccessible'**.

And here's another mood, from a little later on. I must say, it's not a mood that I exactly recommend, but it's the sort of mood that well perhaps we all have from time to time. It doesn't have a title, I simply called it after the first line of the poem, **'Up and Down the Gravel Path'**.

Maybe I should just say a word about the sorcerer's drum. That's a very appropriate local reference because in Kalimpong most of the people were Nepalese, and they had a group or even a caste of people among them called 'Jakkas' (?), sorcerers, and they were quite popular. People used to go to them for all sorts of things. And sometimes you'd hear the Jakka's little drum at night, tac tac tac, tac tac tac, tac tac tac, tac tac tac. In fact one of my cooks was a sort of apprentice sorcerer, and he used to practise in the kitchen after his work was done so I'd hear from quite near: tac tac tac, tac tac tac, so that's the sorcerer's drum, so hence the comparison - I compare the wind-whirled leaves that came thick on my heart to 'dreads that shapes that dance for blood about the sorcerer's drum', because sometimes the sorcerer evokes not very nice spirits that are attracted by the smell of the chicken or goat that he's sacrificed. So a touch of local colour one might say.

Well, now for a completely different mood. This one you may find rather appropriate here on the Convention in view of the kind of weather that we're enjoying. This is called **'Summer Afternoon'**.

Well, you're not all exactly dreaming away the quiet hours, but I think you can share the feeling that I am expressing here!

Well, with the next few poems we come to England, and of course quite early on in the history of the FWBO we started holding retreats - Easter retreats and summer retreats, just those two every year. And we used to hold them in a hired building, on the edge of the Sussex Downs, on the outskirts of Hazelmere, and we used to travel down to Hazelmere from Waterloo very, very happily, going on retreat.

And retreats in those days did mean so much to people. Well, people still do mean a lot to people, but most of the people, nearly all the people, who were going on retreat in those early days, those early years, were working, had regular jobs, so a retreat which came perhaps once or twice a year was a very, very rare treat, a very valuable experience. In fact I can remember occasions when, when the retreat came to an end on a Sunday evening, people would be standing around the gate unwilling to leave and some of them actually crying at the thought of having to go back to work, ordinary life, on that Monday morning. So this little poem, which is not a very serious one by the way, you're allowed to laugh, is called **'Easter Retreat'**.

Well, a poem which arose out of another kind of retreat. Some of you of course have started becoming very familiar with Il Convento, and in the 80s of course Il Convento

was the scene of a series of six men's ordination retreats. I attended all of those. Sometimes I was a little free, and sometimes therefore I produced a few poems. So one of the poems I produced there is called 'St. Francis and the Birds'. It arose out of the facts that the Italians - well, Italian men I must confess - are very fond of shooting little birds, and we used to go out for our walks in the surrounding hills, and every few hundred yards you'd find a man crouched behind the bushes, armed to the teeth, and you know ready to shoot any little bird that ventured near. So I thought this really quite unfortunate. In fact I wrote another long poem about it called Hercules and the Birds, but this is a short one. **'St. Francis and the Birds'**, on that same subject.

I very well remember coming across those heaps of cartridges of all those different colours, it's a very, very vivid and poignant memory.

Well here's a poem about Il Convento, about those retreats, called simply 'Tuscany 1983', so it will probably bring back memories to those of you who have been there, perhaps very recently. So,
'Tuscany 1983'.

Well, we're progressing through the years so we come now to one of those new, unpublished poems. And it's called, **'The Call of the Forest'**.

What does the forest whisper
With every wind-stirred leaf,
From many-centuried oak tree
To our old blossom sheaf?

What does the forest whisper
When nightingales are done,
And cicadas fall silent?
The forest whispers, 'Come'.

What does the forest whisper
In sunshine and in shade,
Down every moss-hung alley,
In each deer-haunted glade?

What does the forest whisper
When full or crescent moon
Steeps nodding crests in silver?
The forest whispers, 'Soon'.

What does the forest whisper
From depths primeval where
The sound is lost in stillness,
As clouds dissolve in air?

What does the forest whisper
When, from the darkling bough,
Drop one by one the dead leaves?
The forest whispers, 'Now'.

But the whisper's a dream-whisper,
For years on years have flown
Since oak and ash and holly
Could call the land their own.

The whisper's a dream-whisper,
For cities of the plain
Usurp the once green kingdom,
Of forests they have slain.

The whisper's a dream-whisper,
For forest is a dream
Of days when man through nature
Had sense of a Supreme.

The whisper's a dream-whisper
Of a time when he could feel
In the pressure of the Actual
The touch of the Ideal.

The whisper's a dream-whisper,
The dreams are of the soul,
And soul itself a forest
Beyond the mind's control.

The whisper's a Soul-whisper,
That like a muffled drum
Calls from your mind-built cities,
"Oh man, to freedom come!"

Well we're getting near the end, but we're going back to The Complete Poems for a poem. This is one which I think I wrote back in the late '60s and it's called '**Life is King**'.

Right, the last two poems are unpublished poems. The first one is **‘White Tara’**.

Appearing from the depth of heaven
The white-robed goddess calm and bright
Sheds, moon-like, on this lower world
The blessing of her silver light.

Seven eyes she has, all open wide,
In face and forehead, hands and feet,
For she of pure awareness is
Embodiment and paraclete.

One hand, in teaching gesture raised,
Imparts a wisdom thrice profound,
The other, open on her knee,
For endless giving is renowned.

A lotus at her shoulder grows,
Complete with flower, and bud, and fruit.
Her form is straight and still, for she
Is grounded on the Absolute.

“Awake, arise,” she seems to say,
“Leave dreams, leave sloth, leave passions vile!”
Oh may we, seeing her, go forth
Encouraged by her perfect smile.

And then, last of all, The Dance of Death. I don't know how many of you are familiar with the Dance of Death, but in the late Mediaeval and early Renaissance period artists often depicted what was called the Dance of Death. Death was represented as a skeleton, and he was shown dancing with all sorts of and conditions of people. There was at the head of the list there was death the skeleton dancing with the pope, even the pope has to die, then with the cardinal, the bishop, the archbishop, the knight, the knight's lady, the merchant, the farmer, the peasant, the beggar. Death dances with them all. In other words, everybody must die, sooner or later. So this poem is on that sort of theme. And perhaps I should mention that when I was in Basel recently in Switzerland I went to the Historical Museum and I saw a whole collection of illustrations of the Dance of Death, evidently the theme was very popular at one time.

So, 'The Dance of Death'.

You dance with emperor, pope and king,
With knight and dame of high degree,
You dance with youth, you dance with eld,
And one day you will dance with me.

You take for partner whom you please.
To choose is yours and yours alone.
And one day I will surely find
Your bony hand within my own.

Your bony knee against my knee
As, whirling with you in the dance,
My eyes behold, an inch away,
Your ghastly grinning countenance.

But if I do not shrink from it,
And boldly look you through and through,
Your bony frame in dazzling light
Will be dissolved and born anew.

Oh you a shining angel shape will be,
And I, released from strife, will find
The Dance of Death to be
The revels of eternal life.

So there you are, thirteen poems. You haven't had to say anything, you've just had to listen, and I hope you've enjoyed it.

(Dhammadinna) Samata, crying again! What can I say? Yes, maybe, yes, tears of emotion, some of us. Well, the look on your faces, yes, I think everybody did thoroughly enjoy your poetry reading Bhante. What can I say but thank you so much for joining us and reading, well for selecting those poems. Well I don't know what to say about that selection except that, well, except what?! It seemed to very sort of poignant, there seemed to be a sort of build-up in it, a building up built up and down again in a way.

...(someone else inaudible) ah right yes, a little humour, quite a lot of seriousness and well, teaching there. So I'm just going to offer you a nice bunch of flowers on everybody's behalf to say thank you.