

PO3: Sangharakshita - an autobiographical sequence of poems

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

It occurs to me that since we were observing my 65th birthday - that the 65th birthday is quite a milestone in one's life - that I ought to read a small, a short selection of mostly quite short, almost epigrammatic poems, which illustrate or throw light on different aspects in different periods of my life. I started off by wondering whether I'd written ever any poems about my childhood, but I'm sorry to have to inform you that so far as I can discover I've in fact written only one poem about my childhood. I did write poems in my childhood but I'm afraid they've all vanished. But there is at least this one poem dealing with my childhood, or an episode in my childhood, and I'm going to start off with that.

I actually wrote it in Kalimpong. I wrote it in 1953 and it refers I think to the period when I was about seven and it's called *Argoses*. I must explain just to give you a little background information that when I was about seven years old I had a birthday. Well of course I had a birthday! And my grandmother presented me with a model yacht, of which I was very, very fond, and I used to go and sail it. And I used to go sailing this model yacht in a place with which some of you at least are quite familiar: Clapham Common. I used to go sailing this boat on Clapham Common in the pond. So this poem is about that. I don't know why I started thinking about Clapham Common and the pond and sailing my boat in Kalimpong of all places but I did! But as you can imagine the poem of sailing the boat has also some symbolical significance! So it's called simply **Argoses**.

The next poem was written in South India and it's called *The Tramp*. I had of course gone forth and I was leading the life of a wandering sadhu but I wrote this poem and called it *The Tramp* - I suppose to some extent I must have identified with the tramp as one would say. I must incidentally say that I have selected these poems principally on account of their autobiographical interest, not on account of their literary merit, which some of you will probably notice in some cases at least is rather lacking. So you'll have to be just a little bit indulgent. So, **The Tramp**.

Well, I wasn't personally able to spend all my life with birds and flowers and butterflies, agreeable as that might have been, but this poem written when I was - how old was I? Just in my middle twenties - does reflect I think a sort of attitude I've kept up, or tried to keep up, the idealism if I may be dare to use that word which I've tried to cultivate all my life.

I'm going to read now another poem from that wandering period which I've read not so very long ago, but some of you seem to like it so I'm going to read it again. It's called *The White Calf*, and it does depict an episode - quite literally depict an episode - that actually occurred in the course of my wandering life in the late forties. (**The White Calf**)

And of course we can't forget Kalimpong. Kalimpong occupies a very important place in my life. I lived there for fourteen years and one of the first poems I wrote in Kalimpong - it was written in 1950 - was one called 'Messengers from Tibet' - the poem gave its title to the first collection of my poems to be published. I don't have a copy of that collection any more. I don't know that anybody else has. The collection was called 'Messengers from Tibet'. The volume was published in 1954. But anyway, here is the poem and it describes the sort of impression that Kalimpong made upon me, rather a romantic

impression in those very early days when I was still quite new to the place. **‘Messengers from Tibet’**.

I very nearly did go to Tibet. I was invited by the Dalai Lama’s government but my going there I am sorry to say was frustrated by the government of India, because there was the possibility that I might be a spy! I’ve told the full story in my as yet unpublished second volume of memoirs. Nagabodhi never objects to a little advance publicity for any of our publications!

All right, in the course of my early days in Kalimpong I read and I wrote quite a lot about the Bodhisattva Ideal. Of course later on I was to write about it in The Survey. I wanted to read now just one poem that I wrote about the Bodhisattva. I think nowadays I would attach even more importance to the Bodhisattva Ideal than I did then. In fact I have been known to say that I didn’t think any Order Member could work in a city environment - work, that is to say, for the Dharma - without some feeling at least for the Bodhisattva Ideal. You’ll notice that in this poem it’s the popular version so to speak of the Bodhisattva Ideal with which I’m concerned. The Bodhisattva is represented as speaking.

“Because I could not muse apart..” etc.

As it were to balance that, something much more as it were autobiographical, this is called ‘The Great Work’, which is an alchemical term as you shall see. It represents another aspect of my life in Kalimpong. **‘The Great Work’**.

And of course all this time I was writing poetry. I didn’t find writing poetry very easy, in fact I still find it very difficult indeed, if not to say almost impossible - fellow poets will no doubt sympathise. This poem is entitled **‘The Modern Bard’**.

Now for something quite different, as they say. I didn’t always stay in Kalimpong. I sometimes descended to Calcutta. In fact I had spent quite a lot of time in Calcutta. Calcutta used to be called The City of Palaces. In my day it was called The City of Processions. I believe they had eight political processions every day in Calcutta, for years and years and years, basically Communist. So I saw one of these processions. The poem is subtitled ‘Calcutta 1953’ so it’s called **‘On a Political Procession’**.

That’s another short one. They’re getting shorter and shorter! This is really no more than an epigram. I wrote it in 1957 in the course of the tour which I made with other ‘distinguished Buddhists from border areas’ as we were called in 1957 in connection with the Buddha Jayanti celebrations and you may recall that Dharpo Rimpoche was with me or rather I was with him on that occasion. And we not only visited places of Buddhist interest but we also visited places of industrial and cultural interest that the government of India thought we ought to see. And they did take us to see the Taj Mahal so I wrote a little epigram on the Taj Mahal and it’s entitled - just to give you a little background - **‘Visiting the Taj Mahal at the time of the Suez Canal Crisis (which many of my Indian friends think to hold me personally responsible) and seeing the tombs of the emperor Shah Jehan and Mumtaz Mahal’**. I think you know the story so I don’t need to go into detail. So this was my impression.

“I passed the square and scripted gate” etc.

Even in those days I was a bit dissatisfied, well quite dissatisfied, with the current state of Buddhism and in particular the Sangha, the monastic order that is to say, so in Kalimpong in 1957 I penned this little epigram on the Sangha. I don't think I showed it to any of my bikkhu friends!

“He wanted that His followers should be flames” etc.

And then of course I also had it in for the scholars! I must have been in a rather irritable mood sometimes! This is my not quite so nice side coming out. **‘The Scholars’**.

Of course from 1959 onwards being in Kalimpong, I could not but encounter Tibetan refugees and they did affect me really quite deeply and I wrote one poem about a Tibetan refugee. It's a woman refugee. And of course it's based on this very strong Tibetan belief or conviction that everybody whom you meet has been your mother in some previous existence and you should feel metta towards them accordingly. So, '**Tibetan Refugee**'.

Between the last poem and the next I've left India and come to London. I didn't write any more poems for quite a while and the one I'm going to read now was written in 1967. But I think they give you, this poem gives you - I simply call it 'Stanzas' -some idea of what was closest to my heart and uppermost in my mind. I quote a line of poetry to begin with from Yeats, and the poem is based on that line.

"Hammer your thoughts into a unity."

In 1968 of course we had our first ordinations and directly after them, as you will have gathered from The History of My Going for Refuge, I went on retreat for a few days with Ananda, who of course was then a fellow Order Member, having just been ordained, and also of course a fellow poet. Is he here? No, he's probably away somewhere in a café writing poems! And I wrote a number of poems while we were on that little retreat, and I'm going to read you one that was a favourite for quite a few years in the early days and that I was rather pleased with actually. It's not much of a poem but it says certain things which perhaps needed to be said. It's called '**The Mask**'.

Now a poem that grew out of a very personal event, a very personal experience, and that was the suicide of a very close friend. I won't say anything about him or about the suicide but the circumstances were very sad indeed, and a few days afterwards I wrote this poem about it, calling it simply '**For the Record**'.

And something rather different. In those early days we had just two retreats a year, one in springtime and one in the summer, or rather one at Easter and one in the summer and people used to look forward to these very much. And it was in 1972 when we'd been going just for 3 or 4 years that I wrote this little poem. It's really just a series of verses called 'Easter Retreat'. I think though it may not be much of a poem it catches the spirit of those occasions, or the spirit that those occasions did have for many people. It's a real period piece by the way! ('**Easter Retreat**')

All right. Coming on now a little closer home, a little nearer the present day, in fact we're very near the end of the readings. I've been at Padmaloka for quite a while now, though I've not actually been in residence for a couple of years, but Padmaloka is still very much my homeless home and my headquarters and in 1978 just before I was due to leave for New Zealand, to which there's a reference in the poem, I wrote this poem, my own little sort of tribute to Padmaloka.

'Three summers and three autumns...'

As I said, I wrote this poem shortly before leaving for New Zealand, and of course I spent several months altogether in New Zealand on two separate visits, and I do have quite a feeling for New Zealand, more especially as I have quite a number of Kiwi friends, so inevitably I've written one or two poems about New Zealand, and I'm going to read you one of them, and I dedicate it especially to all my Kiwi friends who happen to be present on this occasion. It's called '**Green Stone**'.

Now a poem from 'Conquering New Worlds', a poem that one might say brings together several things which are of importance to me, especially what for want of a better term we call religion and poetry. It's called 'After Rilke', not after Rilke in the sense of coming after Rilke in time, but influenced by Rilke or taking Rilke as the exemplar. '**After Rilke**'.

In the various talks you've heard have been various references to Tuscany and of course I happened to be part of or at least there at the time of all the Tuscany ordination retreats and of course I wrote a few poems and I wrote at least one about Tuscany. It's called simply '**Tuscany 1983**'.

A little poem about Bhaja. It's not the greatest of my poems by any means, but I felt I had to include India, again. '**Bhaja 1983**'.

Now we're going to come right bang up-to-date with a poem I wrote last year. I wrote it in Bethnal Green and it's called 'The People of Bethnal Green' - you couldn't be more topical than that, could you?! ('**The People of Bethnal Green**')

All right, last poem. It's a poem that I wrote rather prematurely in 1957. It was almost as though I was expecting my life to end quite soon because it's called 'A Life'. I think it comes in rather appropriately just here, some well 30-odd years later. So we began with a poem that looked back, and I suppose we conclude with a poem that looks forward. It's called '**A Life**'.

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