

## Sangharakshita

### Tape PO4: The Caves of Bhaja

As you've just heard, today, tonight is a full moon day, a full moon night. And it's associated in Buddhist history and Buddhist tradition with the Buddha's first enunciation of the dharma, the truth that he had discovered two months earlier, on another full moon day, or another full moon night, when he attained what we call samyak sambodhi, or supreme and perfect enlightenment.

So full moon days generally are very important in Buddhist tradition, in Buddhist spiritual life. You've already actually celebrated Dharmachakra Day, which is actually today, because apparently it's more convenient to celebrate it on an Saturday or Sunday - more people can come. Though it does seem quite a few people have come [*Laughter*] this evening, for, as it were, a second Dharmachakra Day, a second Dharmachakra Day full moon celebration. But, personally, my thoughts, I must confess, are not so much on Dharmachakra Day today. My thoughts are much more with the second event which we are - I don't know whether 'celebrating' is quite the right word. In a sense it is and in a sense it isn't. Perhaps in the final analysis it is, as I hope will transpire from my poem. Because one month ago, actually on a full moon day, on a full moon night, actually at twelve o' clock at night Maha Dhammavira died or at least initiated the process which did lead to his death. And as Dhammarati has told you, I was moved by his death to write a poem which I'm going to read in a few minutes, but before I actually read it, I'd like just to say a few words about Maha Dhammavira. This is not going to be a proper talk. Not even a talk, much less still a lecture, but I just want to say a few words about him, just to share a few thoughts with you about him; partly because I just want to do so, and partly by way of paving the way for the reading of the poem, giving you - those who do perhaps need it - just a little bit of background information. And it occurred to me as I was thinking this over a few minutes ago, that I'd like to mention, I'd like to draw out if you like, just a few lessons from the life of Maha Dhammavira. I know the word 'lesson' isn't very popular nowadays but perhaps you'll get what I mean as I proceed.

As I thought about it it seems to me that the first lesson that one could learn from Maha Dhammavira's life, a lesson that some of us might be very happy to learn, was that it's never too late! [*Laughter*] It's never too late to start practising the Dharma. You might even have left it as late as, let's say, twenty five, [*Laughter*] But never mind! You can still practise the Dharma. You might even have left it as late as thirty, or forty, or dare I mention fifty, sixty; but in the case of Maha Dhammavira, in a sense he left it even later than that because he didn't really start practising the Dharma, he didn't really come into contact with the Dharma, he didn't really come into contact with the **Sangha**, until he was past seventy, past seventy. And when I met him, on the occasion of his ordination into the Western Buddhist Order of Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha, he was seventy one. So that's quite late in life to make a new start. He'd actually left home, so to speak, several years before that. He's spent several years as a samanera, as a novice monk under the auspices of the Theravada Sangha, the Thai and Burmese Theravada Sangha in India, but he had found it didn't take him very far, it didn't give him what he really wanted, what he really needed. He was still quite hungry, quite thirsty for the Dharma, and, as he afterwards discovered, above all perhaps for the Sangha. So he made this very very late start, and he was a member of the Order, the Western Buddhist Order, the Trailokya Bauddha

Mahasangha, only for four years. And in the course of that time I saw him only, in a sense, twice, because I made two visits to India during that period, though while I was there he'd spend time with me as he possibly could, but we couldn't have spent altogether more than perhaps twenty, thirty hours together. But he had made the contact, and even though it was so late in life in a sense, he'd made that fresh start, and was able, in a way, to reshape his life, redirect his life, all over again. So we can really see from this that - I won't say it doesn't matter how late you leave it, no the earlier the better - but even if you do for one reason or another leave it very late, perhaps due to no fault of your own. Perhaps you just don't make the right contact, the necessary contact, don't make the contact with the FWBO, say, until quite late in life when you've got all sorts of other interests, responsibilities, commitments, but never mind. You can still make progress, you can still develop, you can still change. Because this is in a way the essence of human nature, that it can change. You can change even later than that, you can change even at the moment of death itself. I remember in this connection reading in the life of Johnson - I forget exactly how it comes up - but I think he quotes at one point an epitaph which he had encountered, an epitaph of a man who'd led a rather dreadful life, and who was very fond of hunting, and he had an accident on the hunting field, he fell from his horse and he was killed, **but** in the instant of falling he had a complete change of heart, a complete change of heart, and the epitaph went something like this:

*Betwixt the stirrup and the ground  
Mercy he sought, mercy he found [Laughter]*

You can leave it late as that! *[Laughter]* But of course if you're wise you won't! *[Laughter]* The earlier you can start, the younger you can start, the better. But if it has so happened that you've come to the Dharma, come to the Sangha rather late in life, never mind. Just think, just reflect on the lesson of the life of Maha Dhammavira.

Now, as I've said, I didn't see very much of him in the course of the four years that he was an Order member, but when I did happen to be in India after he was ordained I did at that time see quite a lot of him. He was always around. He stayed with me, he travelled with me. We attended so many meetings together, there were so many lectures he attended, so many ordinations he attended, so many retreats, meditations - he was always there. And I noticed several things about him. He really sort of stood out, partly because he was a very strong presence, even though he was seventy one and seventy three when I knew him, when I had personal contact with him, he was a very definite presence. He was a very strong robust sort of character, even though physically he was beginning to fail. So one couldn't help noticing him. And the most prominent thing about him that I can remember was that he was always cheerful. Whatever the difficulties, and sometimes there **were** difficulties, he was always cheerful. Sometimes travelling conditions were quite difficult. Sometimes, though he was an old man of seventy one or seventy three, he had to fight to get on the Indian bus, and those of you who've travelled in India will know how you have to fight sometimes to get onto an Indian bus, and sometimes when he got on there was no seat for him. He had to stand, maybe for two, three hours, going to a meeting, meeting up with me later on and Lokamitra and others, but he was always cheerful, never a word of complaint, never. And maybe when we had got to our destination there was no food ready, maybe there was no proper place for him to sleep, maybe there was no bedding, but never mind, he was always cheerful, he never complained. And I think if you question people coming from

India who knew him, whether it's Lokamitra or Virabhadra or Ashvajit or Purna or Nagabodhi, I think they will tell you the same story, that they never saw Maha Dhammavira otherwise than cheerful. Whatever the circumstances, whatever the conditions. We think here in Bethnal Green we live under rather difficult conditions! *[Laughter]* We don't have very nice houses and flats, but you should see the conditions under which many of our friends live in India, and under which Maha Dhammavira lived, but he at least was always cheerful, always positive and always happy, and it was completely genuine, it was something that came absolutely from the heart. He really did feel cheerful, he really did feel happy and he beamed at you, quite literally whenever you met him or he met you.

And this leads me to the third point that I want to make, the third lesson. It's in a way connected with his cheerfulness, his positivity, and it is that he was always appreciative. He could never get over the fact that he'd been so incredibly lucky not just to come into contact with the Dharma, because he'd done that some years earlier, but to come in contact with the FWBO. He was always thanking his lucky stars. He was always blessing the day on which he came into contact with the FWBO, the day that he'd met Lokamitra, though that wasn't his very first contact - the day that he'd had a friendly talk with Dharmaditya, yes Dharmaditya's another quite old Order member in India. He's over seventy now I think, and I remember because - I didn't hear it at the time but I read about it in the little biography that Ashvajit wrote and which was published in Shabda some time ago. Apparently at that time, and this was before I actually met Maha Dhammavira myself, I wasn't in India then, apparently this was when he was a samanera, a novice monk still, and he was wondering what else he should do. He wasn't satisfied with being a samanera, he hadn't established proper contact with the Dharma, so he was thinking of going off to Buddhagaya where the Buddha gained Enlightenment, and becoming a fully ordained Bhikkhu, taking his *upasampada*, so this is what he was discussing with Dharmaditya whom he'd known before, and he said to Dharmaditya, 'I think the best thing that I can do is just to go to Buddhagaya and take my *upasampada*, be a fully fledged Bhikkhu, receive full acceptance', as it is called. So Dharmaditya said, 'No. I don't think you should do that.' 'Why?' So Dharmaditya said in effect - in fact I think he used the word - 'You're just looking for promotion!' *[Laughter]* So this rather struck Maha Dhammavira. So he said, 'Well, yes, yes, that could be so, but what could I do? What could I do?' So Dharmaditya apparently saw that the moment was ripe, he said, 'Well, there's going to be an FWBO retreat - come!' But Maha Dhammavira said 'Well, I don't have any bedding, I don't have any blanket or anything, any meditation cushion, how can I come?'. So Dharmaditya said, 'Never mind, just come.' So Maha Dhammavira went on that retreat and he met Lokamitra, which was apparently a quite overwhelming experience for him, *[Laughter]* and he was caught. He realised he'd actually come into contact with the Dharma as **actually practised**, at last. He's actually come into contact with the Sangha, a real Sangha, a real spiritual fellowship, a real brotherhood and sisterhood, and he couldn't get over this. As I say he was always just thanking his stars and blessing the day on which that happened, blessing the day that he made that contact, and this was his state the whole time. He was so happy. I used to sort of marvel at it myself sometimes! *[Laughter]* Yes. I do get now, I'm glad to say, quite often even, letters from people - I might have received even from some of you - letters saying, 'I'm so happy that I've made contact with the FWBO.' Sometimes it's after a retreat or after a meditation, or after a talk with somebody, but most often perhaps after a good retreat. People write and say, 'I'm so happy I've made contact with the FWBO.' But in his case, he was **so** happy that he'd made contact with this

spiritual movement, he was absolutely beyond words, and he always expressed this. There was never any diminution, he never got disappointed with anything. Not that people out there are perfect. He could see that they weren't perfect but the imperfections just didn't matter in comparison with the overwhelming importance of that contact that he had made and what was being offered. He was so incredibly appreciative, and he most of all appreciated his contact with fellow Order members. He couldn't do enough for them, even though he was an old man, over seventy, and beginning to be not as robust as he was, he like to help. He didn't mind what he did - a bit of gardening work, washing-up, washing clothes for somebody, drawing water, chopping wood, or having a chat with them about the Dharma - he didn't mind what he did. He was just so overflowingly happy and so appreciative, and this was really quite striking, quite extraordinary, because, yes, people come into contact with the FWBO, and yes they are very appreciative, almost always, for the while. And unfortunately the freshness of that appreciation wears off a bit. They start seeing faults, they start perhaps finding fault. The gloss goes off things a bit, so yes, it's not that the FWBO is perfect by any means. Yes, there are masses of imperfections in all sorts of people, right from the top to the bottom you could say, but *[Laughter]* the Dharma is there, the Sangha is there, and in the midst of the Dharma, in the midst of the Sangha, yes there is the Buddha. So one has made that contact with the Three Jewels and with the Three Refuges, and the value of what you've actually been able to make contact with so infinitely transcends all these other little weaknesses and imperfections that your attention should be actually on the ideal which is embodied and not on the imperfections of the embodying medium, and I think this is a very great lesson that we can learn from Maha Dhammavira. That we just give our appreciation, that we don't carp, we don't criticise. Yes, if something needs to be pointed out for everybody's sake, just so that it can be put right, fair enough. But nonetheless appreciation should be the keynote. Appreciation should be the key **word** in fact. This is something that I think of very very much when I think of Maha Dhammavira.

So when, a month ago, I think within a few hours of its actually happening, I heard that he was no more, that he was dead, that in fact he'd terminated his own life, well obviously I felt very very moved and very very stirred, very deeply stirred, and at that time I was in the midst of writing my memoirs or writing the latest chapter which was rather dragging. I was rather deeply immersed in this, but when I heard the news of Maha Dhammavira's death, I at once felt like expressing whatever it was I felt, or at least something of it. So I at once set to work. As I matter of fact it was early in the morning. I woke up, I think it was still dark, and just the first few lines came into my head, just a few lines came into my head quite spontaneously, and I thought 'well maybe they'll develop into a poem.' I wasn't too hopeful because I hadn't been doing much poetry writing recently, because other work usually doesn't permit, because to write poetry you need a bit of leisure, you need a bit of time. You need even to **waste** time as I sometimes say. Unless you are free to waste time, you probably can't be a very good poet. If you are a busy sort of person it's very unlikely that you'll do much in the way of poetry writing. At least this is what I find. So I wasn't really expecting these few lines of poetry to develop very much, but anyway I thought perhaps they will, so when I got up, which was quite early I think that morning - about four, four thirty - I thought 'well let me just try', so I wrote out the lines that had occurred to me spontaneously and went on writing and writing and writing, and, to cut a long story short, that day I wrote a hundred lines, which was pretty good for me, even though they were unrhymed lines they were in meter. And the next day I wrote another hundred lines, and the next day I wrote nearly another hundred lines. So I wrote altogether a poem of three hundred lines which is

the longest that I have written since my adolescence! *[Laughter]* I hope the poem does not represent a return to my adolescence! *[Laughter]* Though in some ways I might be happy to return to my adolescence. In some ways. I don't know how good a poem it is. I don't even know whether it is a good poem at all. It may not be. But I'm going to read it anyway! *[Laughter]* Because I'm sure you're hearing this sort of thing from poets around the movement all the time! I'm going to read it anyway because it does express at least something of what I felt when I heard the news of Maha Dhammavira's death. I probably haven't been able to express everything that I felt. I think if I had been able to do that well I probably would be quite a great poet instead of being one of the not quite so great poets. *[Laughter]* But, yes, the poem does spring very much from my feeling for Maha Dhammavira, especially my feeling for him when I heard what was for me, despite the ennobling circumstances, the quite sad and tragic news of his death.

So I am going to read the poem first and then, as you've already heard, we're going to have the puja. I haven't read the poem aloud before, so I haven't really had any practice, but I'll do my best.

The poem is called 'The Caves of Bhaja', and perhaps I should just say a word of explanation. The Caves of Bhaja are ancient Buddhist caves. I think are Third or Fourth Century AD, and our retreat centre in India, which is in between Bombay and Pune is located at a spot just a few hundred yards, or maybe about a mile, from these Bhaja caves. The name of that retreat centre is Dhammadipa, and I stayed there for ten days or so in the course of my last visit, which was the last time I saw Maha Dhammavira. So I've called the poem 'The Caves of Bhaja'.

Often, now, I find myself  
Thinking of the Caves of Bhaja,  
Thinking of the silent valley  
Where they look down on the rice-fields.

Carved out of the living rock-face  
In the Western Ghats, I see them,  
Steeped in shadow in the morning,  
Pierced by sunlight in the evening,  
Cell and meeting-hall and stupa,  
All so silent and deserted.

Once the yellow-robed and shaven-  
Headed monks harmonious dwelt there.  
Every day at dawn assembling  
In the pillared meeting-hall  
They would kneel before the stupa, -  
Lofty stupa, hung with garlands, -  
They would chant the Buddha's praises,  
Chant the praises of the Dhamma,  
And the Sangha's, deep-intoning.

Then, as starting with the eastern  
Quarter, all the sky above them  
Turned one living dome of azure,  
And the sun in all his glory  
Rose up from behind the mountains,  
Some would to the distant village  
Trudge for almsfood for the brethren,  
Older monks would teach the younger,  
And the younger serve the older.  
Some again would ply the mallet  
And the chisel, cutting deeper,  
Deeper in the living rock-face,  
Hollowing out another cavern,  
Making little doors and windows,  
Decorating shaft and lintel,  
While their nimbler-fingered brethren  
On palm-leaf with iron stylus  
Copied ancient manuscripts  
Or recorded oral teachings.  
Others still, in neighbouring thickets  
Spent the hours, so swiftly flying,  
Plunged in deepest meditation.  
Thus the day passed. Every evening  
In the pillared hall assembling  
They would kneel before the stupa, -  
Lofty stupa, hung with garlands, -  
They would chant the Buddha's praises,  
And the praises of the Dhamma,  
And the Sangha's, deep-intoning,  
Till above the Caves of Bhaja  
Rose the moon, and with its radiance  
Turned the whole facade to silver.

Now the ruined cells are empty,  
And the meeting-hall deserted.  
Only buzzards can be seen there,  
Circling high above the rock-face,  
Or else bats, that in the evening  
Flicker in and out like shadows.  
Not a sound disturbs the silence,  
Save when, once or twice a fortnight,  
Bands of little, flower-like children  
(Streaming from the local railway-  
Station just around the ridge-end),  
Marshaled by perspiring teachers,  
Fill the place with furious babble.

From the steps of Dhammadeepa  
We can see the Caves of Bhaja  
High up on the rocky spur there,  
Facing West across the rice-fields,  
Grey in morning, gold in evening.  
We can see the children racing  
Back and forth along the terrace,  
Dots of green and red and yellow;  
We can even hear their babble,  
Hear it thin and faint with distance  
Like the hum of a mosquito.  
For, within the silent valley,  
With its back against the mountains  
We have built a place of refuge.  
Dhammadeepa - thus we call it,  
'Light of Dhamma,' 'Dhamma-Island.'  
On the solid rock we built it,  
Built it well with stone and mortar,  
Laid the red tiles on the rafters,  
Painted it all white and azure.  
Then we sunk a well beside it,  
Planted trees and shrubs around it,  
Laid out gardens, walks, and pathways,  
Till our refuge was complete.

Twenty months ago I stayed there,  
Stayed a while at Dhammadeepa,  
Saw each day the Caves of Bhaja  
High up on the rocky spur there,  
Saw each day the buzzard circling,  
Even heard the children's babble,  
Heard it thin and faint with distance  
Like the hum of a mosquito.  
Then, one afternoon, I issued  
Forth into the blazing sunshine,  
And, with many friends about me,  
Crossed the parched and empty rice-fields,  
Climbed the steps cut in the rock-face  
Flight by rough-hewn flight, until I  
Stood within the Caves of Bhaja,  
Stood within the meeting-hall where  
Long ago the monks, assembling  
In the morning and the evening,  
Loud would chant the Buddha's praises,  
And the praises of the Dhamma,  
And the Sangha's, deep-intoning.

Often, now, I find myself  
Thinking of the Caves of Bhaja  
Thinking of the quiet valley  
Where they look down on the rice-fields.

But it's not of mighty pillars  
On their patient heads supporting  
Rock-cut vaulting that I'm thinking,  
Distant from the Caves of Bhaja,  
Nor of that impassive stupa,  
Lofty still, unhung with garlands.  
No, not even of our refuge,  
Dhammadeepa, am I thinking,  
Not of the ten days I spent there,  
Nor the friends who came to see me,  
Nor the meeting that we held there,  
When we raised the glorious banner,  
Five-hued, of the Buddha's Teaching.  
For, when now I find myself  
Thinking of the Caves of Bhaja  
It is always of our noble-  
Hearted Maha Dhammaveera,  
Our 'Great Hero of the Dhamma,'  
Our old warrior, that I'm thinking.

'When I die,' he said, 'cremate me  
Here within this quiet valley.  
Build a stupa for my ashes -  
No, not in the Caves of Bhaja  
But beside our Dhammadeepa.'

Scarce a month ago he came there,  
Came to lovely Dhammadeepa,  
Came, as ever, friendly, cheerful,  
Came, as ever, kindly, helpful,  
Came on what - though no one knew it  
Save himself - would be his last and  
Best retreat at Dhammadeepa.  
There, among his friends and brethren,  
Day by day he grew more happy, -  
Grew more radiant, - even as the  
Moon, above the rock-face rising,  
Night by night increased in splendour:  
Happy kneeling in the shrine-room  
Chanting loud the Buddha's praises,  
And the praises of the Dhamma,



And the Sangha's, loud and fervent,  
While the white wreaths of the incense  
Curled above the small red roses,  
Curled above the lighted candles;  
Happy squatting in the sunshine  
With his well-loved Dhamma-cronies;  
Happy talking, joking, eating;  
Happy washing clothes and dishes;  
Happy when the time of silence,  
On the whole retreat descending,  
Brought refreshment; happy sitting  
On his meditation cushion.

Thus it was that when the full-moon  
Rose at last above the rock-face  
Our Great Hero's heart was filled with  
Happiness as she with splendour.  
Long he sat there in the shrine-room,  
Long he meditated; wrote a  
Note and pinned it to his pillow:  
'My own action this: none other's';  
Then upon the gravelled terrace  
Took a turn or two (I see him  
Solitary in the moonlight!);  
Took a turn or two, considering,  
Making firm his resolution,  
Weighing all things in the balance;  
Saw the scale of life plunge downward  
And the scale of death fly upward.  
Yes, the time had come now: midnight.  
Down he sat there in the moonlight,  
Sat not far from Dhammadeepa;  
Wringing wet his yellow robes were,  
Wringing wet, but not with water;  
Down he sat, serene and mindful;  
Gazed across the quiet valley  
Up to where the Caves of Bhaja  
Shone like silver in the moonlight,  
Gazed a while, his last look taking.  
Seventy years and more he'd laboured,  
Laboured for the good of others,  
First as son and elder brother,  
Then as husband and as father,  
Finally as homeless-wandering  
Dhamma-farer, ever cheerful,  
Ever friendly, ever active.

Much he loved his Dhamma-brothers,  
Much he loved to serve and help them,  
But alas! his strength was waning  
And the time was fast approaching  
When he could no longer render  
Joyful service to the Order  
But himself have need of service.  
'Better far this frame should perish  
Than that I should be a burden  
To my noble Dhamma-brothers.  
Enough have they to do without me.'  
Strong in this belief he'd come there,  
Come to lovely Dhammadeepa  
For his last and best retreat there.  
Strong in this belief, and happy,  
Quiet he sat now in the moonlight,  
Sat not far from Dhammadeepa;  
Smiled, and then, his robes igniting,  
In a sudden blaze of splendour  
Passed in glory from the world.

That is why I find myself  
Thinking of the Caves of Bhaja  
Thinking of the quiet valley  
Where they look down on the rice-fields.