

Sangharakshita: Poems of the 'Inner Life'

(Includes an Introduction to 'The Light of Asia' by Sir Edwin Arnold)

Padmavajra: Good afternoon. My name's Padmavajra and I'd like to welcome - warmly welcome - those of you who've just arrived to this celebration of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, what we call FWBO Day. We are focussing today on the theme of the Path of the Inner Life and this morning we had a symposium on that theme with talks from Ratnaguna, Ratnagosha and myself. I said in my talk when I introduced the symposium that the FWBO arose out of meditation, or rather I said that that is what Sangharakshita said, the founder, on one occasion, the founder of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. The FWBO has come out of the inner life, or comes out of the inner life of those involved in it, and perhaps in particular it's come out of, it's arisen from the inner life of Sangharakshita himself. As well as being a very active worker for Buddhism, and teacher of the Buddha Dharma, very active in organizing Buddhist activities, Sangharakshita has a very vivid inner life indeed. I think if you read through his various volumes of memoirs you get glimpses of his rich, creative inner life. But perhaps for some people, most gain glimpses of that from his poetry. Perhaps in his poetry they have more, as it were, intimate glimpses of Sangharakshita. They get glimpses of the way he sees the world, the way he experiences the world, the way he experiences even his inner life. And we're very fortunate today to have Sangharakshita, Bhante as we call him out of respect, we're very fortunate to have him with us and what he's going to be doing is reading a selection from his own poems. And I'm very, very pleased to be introducing him to you. So without further ado I wanted to keep my introduction minimal, I'd like to hand over to Bhante, to Sangharakshita, to read some of his poems.

Sangharakshita: As you've heard I'm going to be reading a selection of my own poems and when I was first asked to do this I naturally wondered which poems I should read - whether I should read some of the old favourites, or perhaps whether I should read poems I hadn't read before. But in the end I decided I had better read poems which were in accordance with the theme of this FWBO Day, which of course is the Path of the Inner Life. I couldn't help wondering, though, whether actually I had ever written poems which fell strictly under this heading, so I hastily leafed through my complete poems just to refresh my memory and I found that fortunately I had written at least a few poems which were concerned with the Path of the Inner Life. So it's those poems which I'm going to be reading this afternoon. And I should perhaps mention that they all date from the period 1946-1954, which is quite a long time ago, perhaps even before some of you even started thinking about following the Path of the Inner Life. So I must also mention that as I looked through them, and there are just a dozen of these poems, I discovered that they were in fact rather a mixed bag, and that they represented quite a number of different aspects of that Path of the Inner Life. I'm not going to arrange them, I'm just going to read them in chronological order, so that you can see the ups and downs experienced by one person all those years ago as he sought to follow the Path of the Inner Life.

The first poem doesn't have any title.

Water from the thawed out snow
Trickles to streamlets far below;
Joining with rivers strong and free
It pours at last into the sea.

It loitered not among the sedges,
Nor hung in rainbows over ledges;
It kissed the pebbles as it went,
And yet to go it was content.

Oh keep like water in its flow
The pristine purity of snow;
With deeper currents, swifter streams,
Descending through our land of dreams.

Loiter in no stagnant pool,
Though mossy banks are green and cool;
Sport not long with flags and flowers,
Or swallows in the willow-bowers.

The sea our goal, the snow our source -
Such is our appointed course,
Flowing with sunbeam-spangled motion,
Calmly to the moonlit ocean.

The next poem actually is quite a favourite I know with many of you, but many perhaps haven't heard it before. It's the one called 'Meditation'.

Here perpetual incense burns;
The heart to meditation turns,
And all delights and passions spurns.

A thousand brilliant hues arise,
More lovely than the evening skies,
And pictures paint before our eyes.

All the spirit's storm and stress
Is stilled into a nothingness,
And healing powers descend and bless.

Refreshed, we rise and turn again
To mingle with this world of pain,
As on roses falls the rain.

'Music at Night'

The noise of day is hushed at last,
A cool wind softly blows,
And nightingales make beautiful
The silence of the rose.

Stilled is the storm of passion,
And anxious thoughts depart.
Sweet voices do but make more deep
The silence of my heart.

The next poem also has no title but I did read it recently in Amsterdam by special request by one of our friends, having not ever read it in public before.

Above me broods
A world of mysteries and magnitudes.
I see, I hear,
More than what strikes the eye or meets the ear.

Within me sleep
Potencies deep, unfathomably deep,
Which, when awake,
The bonds of life, death, time and space will break.

Infinity
Above me like the blue sky do I see.
Below, in me,
Lies the reflection of infinity.

'Aspiration'

The dim sun sinks to rest
In a west of watery gold.
The young stars climb the sky
And there like flowers unfold,
In the forest vast of night,
Petals of purest light.

So may my heart unfold,
When the suns of the world have set,
In the forest vast of the Void,
Wisdom with Mercy met
In that tranquil, silent hour,
Like a flower and the scent of a flower.

‘Himalayan Sages’

Those who have hid themselves on heights of snow,
Face to face with the stars and the silver moon,
Shall read upon the rocks the Ancient Rune
And thus decipher secrets. They shall know -
Far from the lips of any earthly lover -
What the mists hide and what the winds discover.

And, with grave eyes of wisdom, they shall scan -
Pitting terrific wills against th’ Unknown,
Wringing its secret out of every stone -
The origin and destiny of man;
Shall see a hundred thousand ages roll
Through one brief instant of the human soul.

They shall know utter peace. They shall not feel -
Immersed, upon those constellated peaks,
In that deep joy whereof no language speaks -
The bitterness and bite of brandished steel.
The tumult of the world rolls on and on:
They shall not hear or heed it. They have gone

Afar upon that path which no man knoweth
Save who can frailties and passions tread
Underfoot, leave the living and the dead
For snowy heights whereon no green grass groweth,
And, meditating there, intensify
Th’ electric urge to thrust beyond the ‘I’.

‘Advent’

I listened all day for the knock of the Stranger,
And I often looked out from the door.
The table was scrubbed, the brass shining,
And well swept the floor.

The shadows grew longer and longer,
In the grate the fire flickered and died.
‘It’s too late. He never will come now’
I said, and sighed.

I sat there musing and musing,
The spinning-wheel still at my side.
The moonlight came in through the window
White like a bride.

As the clock struck twelve I heard nothing
But felt He had come and stayed

Waiting outside. And I listened -
And I was afraid.

‘The Face of Silence’

Before me through the evening air
With robes of saffron hue
And one lean, sunbrowned shoulder bare
And shadow long and blue

He went. I watched him till he turned
A turning of the road.
The West one golden glory burned
And all the treetops glowed.

With such a flood of beauty came
The setting sun that day
That him who walked as though in flame
Before me on the way

I quite forgot. The stars of night
Like silver doves did seem
On the bare branches to alight -
I thought that I did dream.

Then at that turning as I turned
Where he had turned before
When all the trees like torches burned,
At the tree-root I saw

Him sitting on a grassy space
Poised in some lofty swoon:
On his still form and peaceful face
Shone bright the broad full moon.

All breathlessly and silently
With awe I tiptoed near;
And yet - he looked so peacefully -
I had no sense of fear.

O'er his still features breathed a calm
I had not seen before.
It drew me as some maiden's charm
A lover to her door.

The light he saw I could not see,
And yet it seemed to glow
Upon his face more beautifully
Than sunlight on the snow.

At last I turned away, and blessed
The womb that gave him birth,
Knowing that there in truth was rest
And peace for those on earth.

‘On The Brink’

Here on the river-brink I sit
Where thick the tall white lily grows,
And feel the clear, cold ripples break
With icy kisses on my toes.

The willows trail their almond leaves
With one side white, and one side green,
Atop the glasswaves tremblingly,
While the shrill wind blows cold and keen.

The waves that nibble at my feet
Are touched with dull, hard glints of gold,
And the shadows of the tired sun
Stretch out more long and black and cold.

The moon, by one white star attended,
Lies on her bright back crescent-thin.
I weep beside the blackening waves
Because I failed to venture in.

‘The Gardener’

The gardener crops his rose-tree’s hundred buds,
That when it grows
Rich with the breath of Summer, it may bear
One perfect rose.

And even so I prune my budding thoughts,
That in me should
Spring sweetly forth the single perfect bloom
Of Buddhahood.

This poem too has no title, but it tells its own story, so to speak.

Up and down the gravel path,
Between the flowering trees,
I’ve walked this Summer afternoon
To give my spirit ease.

I could not idly stand, nor sit
Upon the grassy ground,
For like a mill-wheel in my head
The thoughts flew round and round.

Oh thoughts of life and thoughts of death

Chased thoughts of love and pain
Like golden hawk and sable dove
Inside my reeling brain.

The withered hopes like wind-whirled leaves
Thick on my heart did come,
With dreads like shapes that dance for blood
About the sorcerer's drum.

So up and down the shadowy paths,
Between the moon-white trees,
Through pools of silver, I must walk
To give my spirit ease.

And, to conclude, 'The Great Work', the work in which in one way or another, we are all engaged.

With grey-green fir and blue-black pine communing,
With tulip-tree and smooth camellia, - where
The last dark red and first white rose are blooming,
I sit, reclining in my cane armchair.

Head propped on hand, from dawn to dusk the garden,
Through sparse leaves peering with a thousand eyes,
Beholds me as I watch the sunbeams harden
And eve drip coldly from the wintry skies.

Day after day, beside my friend the mountain
I sit, and as in dream hear close at hand
My neighbours, tall bamboo and bubbling fountain,
Talking in words that I half understand.

Not indolence or ennui, soul-destroyers,
Nor sickness convalescent, holds me here,
But the Great Work, which to all mere enjoyers
Of 'doing' must as idleness appear.

But if against the sun you ever lifted
Red wine or emerald water in a bowl,
You'll know, recalling how their dregs were sifted,
I clear the turbid liquid of my soul.

And since in those dark waters still is lying
Thick sediment uncleared, so many days
Musing I sit, till, slowly purifying,
Shine through them as through crystal the sun's rays.

(Padmavajra) Thank you very much, Bhante, for reading that selection of poems on the theme of 'The Path of the Inner Life' - very difficult to sum up, or even to follow, a reading of poems like that, but there were two

things that struck me about it. First of all, one of the things that came over for me was the purity with which Bhante wrote and with which Bhante felt in those poems. He said that they were poems he wrote in his early days of practising the spiritual life and you really felt that pure aspiration and inspiration come across. I was also struck by his comments when he said at the beginning that he was going to show some of the ups and downs of somebody's spiritual life and I think that I'd just like to recommend that you read his poetry because you really do get a feeling - amongst other things - for the ups and downs of the spiritual life. We sometimes think that the spiritual life, or the inner life, should be very smooth and straightforward and we get very frustrated and disappointed when it doesn't conform to how it's all laid out in the great treatises. I think we need to read poetry by people like Bhante to get a feeling for the ups and downs, the heights and depths, of spiritual life, of the path of the inner life, so thank you very much Bhante for your poetry reading.

I'm now going to introduce Bhante to you again. We're moving on, we're in a perhaps a number of different guises this afternoon because what Bhante's going to do now is to launch a book. I'm not going to tell you what the book is, he'll do that, so, Bhante is now going to do a book launch.

(Bhante) Yes I'm going to do a book launch, but the first thing I have to make clear is that the book is not by me. So it isn't exactly an exercise in self-promotion. The book was actually written by someone who died twenty-one years before I was born. The author of the book is Edwin Arnold, and the book is *The Light of Asia*, and it's been published, or perhaps I should say re-published, by Windhorse Publications.

And I must say I'm very pleased, I'm very happy, that Windhorse Publications has decided to reprint this old classic, this favourite of so many Buddhists in the course of the last so many decades. It's certainly an old favourite of mine. Those who've read the first volume of the of my memoirs may recollect that it was one of the very small volumes which I packed into my kit-bag when I went, or rather when I was sent, to India in 1944, and I've had a copy of it, I think, around me ever since that time. It's been with me in many parts of India, it was with me I think during my wandering days, at least for some of them, and it's been with me on many occasions back in the West.

And I'm not only glad, not only happy that Windhorse Publications has decided to bring it out in a new edition, but I'm also happy that they invited me to write an introduction specially for this edition. The book as I've already indicated has been very, very popular with Buddhists and friends of Buddhism, and those interested in the Eastern wisdom as we used to say, and I managed to find out that by 1957 - I don't have any information for after that date - but by 1957 at least 83 bibliographically distinct editions of the book had been brought out in English, in the original language, and there were of course translations into a number of different languages, both Western languages and languages of the East, it was dramatised, it was made into a film believe it or not, I haven't seen the film, but it was made into a film in the very early days of picture-making, and it's been illustrated by artists, some of them famous and some of them not so famous, so in my view Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* is still very much worth reading.

In the course of my introduction I mentioned very briefly five reasons for which it is worth reading, and I'll mention those even more briefly just now. First of all, *The Light of Asia* tells the story of the Buddha's life up to and including the Enlightenment and of course as Buddhists and people

sympathetic to and interested in Buddhism, they all like to know about the Buddha's life especially perhaps before he became enlightened because that possibly makes him feel a little closer to us.

And the second reason for our reading *The Light of Asia* is that it isn't a prose treatise. Sometimes when you read lives of the Buddha, especially scholarly ones, you get rather bogged down in details about whether he lived in that particular year or that particular decade or whether he died on that particular date or ten years or fifteen years later, you get rather tired of all that sort of thing, and perhaps you get long descriptions of the archeology of the various sites where he lived and taught. You want to know actually about the Buddha's life, and that certainly is what Arnold, Edwin Arnold's poem does give you. It's an epic poem. And very often poetry can move us and inspire us very much more than prose can do, even a prose account of the Buddha's life.

So yes the third reason is that it's a very inspiring work. It gives a very vivid picture of the way in which the Buddha was brought up, left home, struggled for Enlightenment as he too sought to follow the path of the inner life. There are beautiful vignettes of Indian life which those who have been to India, those who have visited India, as many of you have done, can recognise from your own experience, because in some respects India hasn't changed all that much in 2,500 years.

And then again, fourth reason, *The Light of Asia* is of some historical importance because for many people in the West, for tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, it constituted their very first introduction to Buddhism, to the life of the Buddha, to the Buddha's teaching, so it has that great historical importance.

And fifthly and lastly *The Light of Asia* was written by a man who loved India and loved the Indian people. Edwin Arnold spent in fact quite a number of years in India as a fairly young man and he happened to be for some years the principal of the (Deccan) College in Poona. It was there that he added to his store of languages - he was already a formidable linguist but when he found himself in India as principal of the Deccan College he took advantage of his opportunities with so many Sanskrit pundits around and he learned Sanskrit, which is a language that not all of us find easy to learn, but he had a gift for languages and he seemed to have learned it quite well, quite quickly.

He is also of importance and interest in connection with the Buddha Gaya Maha Bodhi Temple. Many of us know about Anagarika Dharmapala's efforts to reclaim and restore the Buddha Gaya Temple on the site where the Buddha gained enlightenment, but not many people know that Dharmapala learned initially about the sad condition of the Buddha Gaya Temple years before he went to India when he read an article about it in, of all places, the Daily Telegraph. I must remind those of you who are not readers of the Daily Telegraph that the Daily Telegraph that the Daily Telegraph was in those days a radical newspaper, and the editor of it for many, many years was none other than Edwin Arnold, and in the course of his travels in India he had noticed the deplorable condition of the Maha Bodhi Temple, so he wrote about it, he agitated in fact for its restoration, he wrote leader articles about it in the Daily Telegraph, and one of those happened to be read by Dharmapala and the rest, as we say, is history.

So we've every reason to read *The Light of Asia*, or to re-read it if we do happen to have read it before, and I'm therefore very happy that Windhorse Publications has made it available in this beautiful new edition. It's in hardback, and I was very glad to notice that it opens absolutely flat! Sometimes - to me at least as a lover of books - it's very annoying when you open a book and it doesn't open flat so that you can't even see the words at the end of the line, but this book, I can assure you, and in fact I can show you, that it opens absolutely flat! And if I turn it over - no, it's

on the inside - if I look at the where the blurb is I see that it's available for the ridiculous price of £9.99, or \$19.95 American.

And of course it comes as so many of our Windhorse Publications come with a really beautiful cover by Dhammarati. I'm especially pleased to see this particular cover which is taken from part of a painting which I saw in the course of my last visit to Australia when I was taken to a place called (Ballarat). It is Ballarat I think, yes the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, and I saw the original of the painting from which Dhammarati has taken this part for the cover of this edition of *The Light of Asia*.

So perhaps I don't really need to say anything more than that. I've introduced the book to you, and you I hope to the book, and the rest is therefore up to you!