

Cutting Away the Old

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Manjughosha's (Manjushri's) book and sword; Zorro; sword fights in films; Excalibur; visualizing the symbols; the jewelled hilt

...Thank you very much, Vadanya. Hello to everyone.

Yes — well — one day last year Samanatha asked me if I would give a talk on Manjughosha at this men's event, and, well, it was pretty well a year away and I'm very fond of Manjughosha so I said, 'yes, I will.'

And then I got into preparing the talk — well, you know — thinking about it. And being, you could say, a bookish kind of person, I was beginning to get into the implications of some of the ideas of Manjughosha's book, when, some considerable time later, Vadanya phoned me up and said that I am to concentrate on the sword! — I could smuggle in a few remarks about the book, yeah, that was ok — but the sword's the thing!

So, well, I thought, 'yeah, I'll do it'. Because come to think of it, I have always *liked* swords. I used to play for hours on my own when I was a kid of about six or eight, piercing the hearts and slashing the heads off enemies single-handed — you know — I would jump from sofa to armchair and all over the place — under the table — just decimating and cutting down these enemies.

I also used to love films about 'Zorro' (if you've heard of 'Zorro') — the black-masked swordsman. He would always leave his mark. When he had done his saving of the damsel in distress or whatever, he would always leave his mark by slashing a Z... [DEMONSTRATES SWORD-SLASHING SOUND]... on whatever piece of furniture was available... [LAUGHTER] ... it could be the side of a stage-coach... [REPEATS SWORD-SLASHING SOUND] ... I used to love that!

But in the latest version... I don't know whether you saw the latest version of 'Zorro'... [LAUGHTER]... it was a *huge*, flaming Z on the side of a valley — brilliant!

I also used to love the ring of steel on steel in swordplay. I've always liked sword-fights in films — there's a sword-fight in the latest 'James Bond' film, by the way — and I used to like the clatter of the blade falling on the stone when Robin Hood finally cornered the evil Sheriff of Nottingham. *Rob Roy* is a good one, too, I don't know whether you've seen it... [LAUGHTER]... some great sword fights in *Rob Roy*.

And I mustn't forget to give Excalibur a look in; the wondrous, jewel-hilted sword of King Arthur, who, as he lay dying, asked his man Sir Bedevere to deliver the sword back

to the lake from whence it came. As a boy I was always enchanted by that image of the arm appearing, breaking the surface of the lake... and brandishing the sword.

...Of course, Sir Bedevere funks. He won't throw the sword back the first time and the second time, and Arthur threatens to kill him if he won't throw the sword back the third time. So he goes back to the edge of the lake, looks at the beautiful jewelled hilt, and finally throws it... and this arm appears out of the lake and catches the hilt of the sword; this arm, *'clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful'*. And the arm brandishes the sword three times, and disappears into the depths...

So I am sure that all this, in its way, had some influence on my attraction to Manjughosha when I first came across the figure, in my interest in Buddhism. And I am sure it was quite an influence in my asking Bhante, my preceptor and spiritual teacher, if I could do the Manjughosha practice.

Because there it is — the sword — one of the two chief emblems of Manjughosha (or Manjushri — they are both the same figure). The sword and the book are the two chief emblems of Manjughosha, or Manjushri.

And sometimes (and I like this image very much) you see the two of them together. You don't see Manjughosha; you just have this beautiful symbol of a fully opened lotus — usually a pale blue lotus flower, fully opened — and cushioned on the lotus flower is the moon mat, and then on top of the moon mat, resting on the moon mat, is the wonderful Book of Wisdom, wrapped in gold silk.

Then, poised above (or resting on top of) the book, there is the sword; vertical. The sword of Manjughosha is, of course, a flaming sword, and the flames are depicted usually in rather stylised fashion as a wreath of flames winding round the tall, slender blade. But I prefer to imagine the polished steel of the blade as glowing, as if it is radiating an aura of white heat from its inner power.

The vajra hilt is fashioned in gold, and it is studded with jewels; perhaps three jewels, arranged one beside the other along the length of the shaft. One amber, one sapphire and one ruby, for Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Cutting away and revealing; eternal youth — the golden light; destruction and creation — the subtle knife and new worlds; things that hold us back

So the sword of Manjughosha is our transcendental Excalibur whose magical powers we are going to celebrate and reflect on in the course of this weekend. And the main theme of my talk is the 'cutting away of the old' — getting rid of whatever it is that conceals and impedes our spiritual development — so that the element in one that has been so long hidden is finally revealed: Manjughosha's eternal youth.

And this eternal youth of Manjughosha is associated with the golden colour of sunlight; sunlight early in the day. Manjughosha's body — his archetypal body — is made of

golden light. Vadanya said last night that we can think of Manjughosha sort of as our ideal being; the golden light deep (or maybe not so deep!) in us.

But unfortunately the golden light is not always so evident. It gets covered over; it gets obscured. So my talk is all about getting rid of those obscurations, those defilements, those impediments, so that we can get back in touch with our eternal youth.

The sword, of course, is a weapon of destruction, and that is what we are concerned with this morning. We are concerned with destruction — destroying all the obstructions; defeating the enemy — before Padmavajra, tomorrow, tells us how to use the subtle knife to enter new worlds.

So, yes: one talk has to come before the other; and there are two aspects to the weekend. But we have to be careful about separating them out too cleanly. They are distinguishable, yes — obviously — but they are also interwoven; or rather, they are two aspects of the same process. It's not that we cut away the husks and the rough stuff and pick all the rotten bits out before we can cut a frame into the new world... but it is as if these two processes are going on at the same time. Otherwise we'd be at it for ever! — trying to get rid of all the impurities before we can step into the new world.

So let's remember (I think this is quite important) that destruction is an aspect of creation; that creating the new inevitably involves some destroying.

The first question we have to ask ourselves in this context is, 'What exactly is it that Manjughosha's sword is going to destroy?'

Well, the sword of wisdom cuts away the *old* — the old as opposed to the young; the old as opposed to the new.

So what is it? What is the 'old' in us, in this context? Whether we are 12, 15, 22, 62 or 82... what is the 'old' in us, in the context of our spiritual life? What is it that holds back the spiritual life force, the infinite life force which ideally we should always be able to access?

...Negative, restrictive patterns that hold us back from truly being ourselves. False views and habits that prevent us realising our potential. Or — to use more the language of Buddha nature — it is whatever prevents us from resting or residing in our essential being. Stale ways of being, stunted self-views, listless passivity... or, at the other extreme, the vigorous pursuit of wrong ends.

Such ways — the ways of the reactive mind — are enfeebling; they disempower us. They are like the physical ravages of age, of our physical body. They are the spiritual ravages (or non-spiritual ravages!) of our spiritual body.

The Lord of the Rings — Theoden, King of the Golden Hall; Gandalf's Staff; removing the effects of the reactive mind; quelling the demon

At this point in my preparation a sequence from the 'Lord of the Rings' film came to my mind — not surprising I suppose; lots of swords in 'Lord of the Rings!' — but the latest episode is called *The Two Towers*, and afterwards, after I had seen the film, I looked it up in the book, and it's called *The King of the Golden Hall*.

The 'King of the Golden Hall' is Theoden, who, unfortunately, has come under the influence of the evil Saraman through the agency of his servant, Wormtongue, who has also unfortunately been bought by Saraman (but I don't want to go into too many details).

It is this image of the enfeebled King that I found so striking. He sits crumpled on his throne — and the text says:

'So bent with age that he seemed almost a dwarf — looking at least a hundred years old, ashen in complexion and wrinkled, deprived of all initiative.'

...He is passive; he can hardly even speak; and he is only open to the poisonous words of Wormtongue, and these words weaken him still further.

But then Gandalf and company arrive on the scene. The Bodhisattva returns! And very soon the power for good is at work through the agency of Gandalf, Theoden's saviour.

Now, it is not a sword that Gandalf uses to restore the King's powers; they have had to leave all their weapons outside. It is a staff. But, of course, Gandalf's staff is a *magic* staff... and as he points it and thrusts it, more like a spear than a sword, we see the visible signs of Theoden's false age crumble away, and he stands up tall from his throne, a man again... a King again.

So I am citing this as an appropriate image for the power of the creative mind, that can sometimes very quickly cut through the obscurations of the reactive mind; sometimes in a very magical way.

We see something similar on retreat here at Padmaloka; I'm sure we'll see it this weekend. We see how people on the retreat, even in a weekend, can become quite dramatically transformed — in appearance, even — as a result of spiritual practice. They leave the retreat looking younger! It's magical. It's wonderful.

So, our weekend here is a spiritual workshop on how to use Manjughosha's sword to remove the crippling effects of the reactive mind, constantly and systematically. We won't achieve it in a single day, but if we do this, we will begin to look even physically fresher — younger — or at least, even if we can't shed the physical marks of age, the brightness of Manjughosha's eternal youth will shine from our eyes... our being.

Now you might like the idea of getting a grip of Manjughosha's sword. You might be already, in your mind's eye at least, enjoying the feel of the vajra hilt in your hand. (By the way, if you *do* get hold of it, don't forget that you have to have the demon-quelling

mudra — yeah? You hold it with the demon-quelling mudra, because this sword does literally destroy demons!). But if you are enjoying the feel of it, you also have to know what it is you are going to start thrusting and slashing at. I must ask myself — you must ask yourself — what are the qualities, the tendencies, the proclivities, the bad habits, that constantly sap away at my spiritual energy? Is there one particular *bette-noir*? One particular terrible demon, that I'd really like to have a go at?

...It could be an inhibiting self-view. It could be, say, to do with lack of confidence. It could be my bad temper. It could be a communication block that you have with someone — someone you work with, someone you live with — a block in communication that has been interfering with your spiritual life for weeks; for months; even, unfortunately, for years. Or it could be something nasty (or something you think is nasty!) that's lurking, that you've been keeping very private for yonks, and yet it's sapping at your vitals! — something, maybe, we want to confess; something maybe we feel like confiding — and yet we've never been able to bring ourselves to do it. And yet it's in the way. We want to get rid of it.

Well... it could well be the sword of Manjughosha, even this weekend, that does this for you. Just bring the nasty or pathetic demon into the open — hold the tip of the sword to it (don't forget, it's a flaming sword) — and it will be (hopefully) immediately reduced to ashes!

A magic sword; quote from 'The Flower Ornament Scripture' — Entering the Realm of Reality; Bodhicitta as higher nature; decapitation; resentment — quote from Hamlet; cutting off the sprout

So — I'm already beginning to answer my next question, which is: 'having identified the enemy, how are we going to destroy it?'

Well, the two things go together really. We are going to destroy it with the sword, of course — and don't forget that Manjughosha's sword is a versatile weapon. It is not only versatile, it's magic — it's a magic sword — and this magic sword can change in size and shape according to circumstances. So you needn't feel stuck with a long, narrow blade that feels rather unwieldy and heavy. There is a wrathful, or angry, form of Manjughosha... I won't say much about it, but this wrathful form has many pairs of arms, and in these many pairs of hands you see all sorts of different kinds of weapons. So I take this as an image for the versatility of Manjughosha's sword.

So how are we going to destroy the enemy? I want to call on two spiritual masters to help me to do this. One of them is Buddhist; he is (or they are) the unknown author(s) of a scripture called the 'Flower Ornament Scripture'. That is the first master I am going to call on. And the other one is a Neoplatonist master — Neoplatonism being a form of Western philosophy... don't worry about it... [LAUGHTER]... but one of the masters of Neoplatonist philosophy is called Plotinus. So he is the other master I'm going to invoke in the rest of my talk.

This is what the 'Flower Ornament' has to say, in a chapter called *Entering the Realm of Reality* — interesting, because that's what we're doing; we are trying to enter into the realm of Reality (with a capital R) — and the text says:

'It is like a scimitar, cutting off the head of affliction. It is like a sword-blade, slashing through the armour of pride, conceit and ignorance. It is like a razor, slicing off compulsive propensities. It is like an axe, cutting through the tree of suffering. It is like a surgical probe, cleaning away the covering of the sheath of ignorance.'

— So that's what 'it' is like. 'It' is like a scimitar; like a sword-blade; like a probe. Actually the repeated 'it' in that passage is what in Buddhism is called the 'Bodhicitta' — the heart or mind of Enlightenment — which arises in a mysterious, wonderful way when we have done the right kind of practice.

But the use of Manjughosha's sword in our present context is very much to do with whatever *prevents* this arising of the Enlightened mind; so the passage also lends itself to illustrating how versatile Manjughosha's sword is. At this stage of our spiritual development, the Bodhicitta — the mind of Enlightenment — doesn't operate spontaneously, so we have to (as it were) invoke our 'higher nature', the Bodhicitta deep within us, in order to take up the sword against our 'lower nature'.

The instrument of the 'higher nature' is the sword of Manjughosha... and it is not just a matter of thrusting, as in sword play with rapiers. The first action is this: in the text it says, *'It is like a scimitar, cutting off the head of affliction.'* You know a scimitar is a broad, long, curved blade — very sharp — so what we are talking about here is decapitation! ...Is there anything afflicting you that you can dispense with swiftly by slashing off its head, clean and quick, and afterwards it will never bother you again? Can you think of an example in your spiritual life where you could do this?

...I can think of one example, and that example is resentment. You know resentment? Resentment is stale anger which you constantly regurgitate and indulge in, maybe for hours on end! It is a horrible affliction; it's an insidious enemy that is terribly incapacitating. Wow... we've got a slogan there, haven't we? 'Incapacitate — decapitate!'... [LAUGHTER]... I like that!

In his first soliloquy, Hamlet (in Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet*) is talking about his mother's lust for Claudius, and he says:

'Why, she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on!'

...What an image, eh? Resentment is like that. If we indulge in it, it gets bigger; it 'grows by what it feeds on'. So the only thing is to cut off the beast's head, with Manjughosha's sword as scimitar, otherwise it just keeps coming back and growing.

Of course, I agree the metaphor does have its limitations... because we know that in our experience of resentment, it *does* keep coming back. But the thing is not to indulge it.

You decapitate it every time, as soon as it appears; you cut it off at source. The sword of Manjughosha is always active.

'Cutting off every sprout of dukkha, you grasp the sword' — that's a quotation; a line from a devotional verse in honour of Manjughosha.

'Cutting off every sprout of dukkha, you grasp the sword.' ...Dukkha is suffering. So you cut off the sprout, so that it can't grow into the full-blooded monster.

Armour — conceit and ignorance; razor sharp, white hot; compulsive propensities; vigilance at the gates of the mind

Ok, so much for decapitation.

Then, says the 'Flower Ornament Sutra', it is *'like a sword blade, hacking through the armour of pride'*. — I'm going to change that — well, it also mentions axe, so let's consider it as *an axe hacking* through the armour of pride, conceit and arrogance.

I want to underline the word 'armour' here; we are concerned here with a resistant 'armour' of well-established patterns, formed through habitually acting in the same negative way, and this builds up into an armour. It is not an armour like a suit of armour; it is more like scales of encrustation which habitual negative emotion builds up, and it is quite resistant — they are hard scales which stubbornly cling — so sometimes a bit of hacking is in order; the sword as axe.

I suppose one might say that this evokes the need to work at some of the afflictions with vigour. It is a bit like the story of the man in Zen who hits the rock, maybe smashes at the rock with the axe, nineteen times... and nothing happens. You've got to do that sometimes — just keep pegging away. You bash away. There is that aspect, actually, to the spiritual life, so you have to have vigour in that — you bash away, you know? And you don't worry too much if, after five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten bashes, nothing has happened. You keep at it. And then, on the twentieth blow... the rock splits.

So that is what we are concerned with here; with this hacking away at this armour of conceit, arrogance and pride.

Then, the text says, it is *'like a razor slicing off compulsive propensities'*. ...This is similar to the previous one, but rather more refined; more refined in its razor-sharpness. It means we can *slice*, rather than slash. And again I remind you that the blade of Manjughosha, whatever form it takes, in all its magical transformations, is always blazing; it is always burning. So you have this formidable combination of razor-sharp and white-hot! But you don't have to worry about the wound afterwards; it will always be cauterised. There is no infection...

But the difference in weapon here suggests a difference in the affliction that we have to deal with. In the previous case it was a matter of the armour of conceit and arrogance

built up over a long time into a kind of shell that encases us — therefore it has to be hacked through vigorously. But here, the enemy is 'compulsive propensities'. A propensity is a natural tendency to act, or to speak, or even to think, in a certain way. And this tendency develops through habitual repetition, over years sometimes. It is so strong — *so* strong — that it can become that we have to use the word 'compulsion'. 'Compulsion' suggests that we are *driven* to act, rather than choosing to act.

So, we feel *driven* to act in a particular way; we have this 'propensity'. It seems, sometimes, we can't stop ourselves. It is as if the action *slithers out*, like a snake. ...So I would like to suggest that the razor-sharpness required here is experience, in terms of *mindfulness* — mindfulness as vigilance — being very vigilant, very aware of yourself in a certain mood, when these snakes can slither out.

You have to be vigilant at the gates of the senses — that is a traditional Buddhist spiritual practice, being vigilant at the gates of the senses — but this is also being vigilant at the gates of the mind; on the watch out for any unskilful tendency that might sprout. It is especially important in the case of propensities. I could give you examples; you could give me examples. Think — ask yourself — 'do I have any compulsive propensities?' *Do* you have any compulsive propensities? Maybe you don't! Some of you are smiling quite broadly... I can't read it... it might mean, 'no — not me!' ...but it might mean, 'you've got me — yeah! — I have.'

So you might, for instance (let's just take a simple example)... you might for instance have the compulsion to bite someone's head off at breakfast. You might feel like that *every* breakfast time, or nearly every breakfast time. You just have this compulsion to do it... because you're never at your best at that time. For some reason you nearly always get out of bed... the wrong end, or something?... I can't remember!... there's a.... yeah, you get out of bed the wrong end and you just have this compulsive tendency to snap at breakfast time.

Now, this is an opportunity to take — to invoke — Manjughosha's sword as razor... and you *slice off* your angry words as soon as they form; not even on your lips, but in your mind. It takes awareness; you have to act pretty quickly. It is not easy. And it requires, as I say, special vigilance and control in order to be in a position even to make the attack.

The spiritual friend as surgeon; *klesha* and *jneya* — two 'veils' (*varanas*) or 'afflictions', emotional and cognitive; a demon in meditation

The last transformation of the sword in this text is quite intriguing: it is '*like a surgical probe, cleaning away the covering of the sheath of ignorance*'.

This is a very difficult case, eh? This is a case requiring invasive surgery! ...Oh dear! This is especially difficult, I reckon, because here we may have actually to give the sword up — to entrust it to the hand of one's spiritual friend. The spiritual friend as surgeon, in whose hands the magic sword of Manjughosha becomes a scalpel, and then a probe.

...Well, actually, it's not really a scalpel. It's not so much like you hand in the scalpel and say, 'please operate on me,' — because in a way you have used the scalpel *on yourself*. You have opened up; you feel open through your spiritual practice. You feel open, and you enter into this kind of relationship with your spiritual friend... and he, then, is able to probe — maybe deeply — but very gently, very skilfully.

It is interesting that in this case the enemy to be destroyed is the '*sheath of ignorance*'. It is more in the nature of a *jneya*, rather than a *klesha*... I've tried to avoid Sanskrit Indian words in this talk but I'm just going to introduce these two, because they are the two obscurations that we are dealing with in our spiritual life, so it is good to know this couple of terms: the *jneya* and the *klesha*. They are the two *avaranas*, or the two veils — the two obscurations.

So far I have been talking about the *kleshas*, which are more like *emotional* afflictions; they are what impedes us in our emotional relationship to the world. But these we're dealing with now — the *jneyas* — are *cognitive* afflictions — they are to do with knowledge; they're to do with how we understand how we are, or how the world is.

So I'm using *jneya* as a cognitive affliction (I use this word 'affliction' in preference to 'defilement' or 'obscuration' because it conveys that the wrong view — the cognitive obscuration — actually causes us suffering). So that is what we are concerned with here. It is '*like a surgical probe cleaning away the covering of the sheath of ignorance*'. The 'sheath of ignorance' is a false view of ourselves which causes us suffering, yet it is very important to us. It is an illusory self that we think protects us. It is a sheath of false refuge, very close to the bone, to the delicate tissues of our egoity... so it needs not slashing but careful probing, careful cleaning away, at least at the early stages.

But I don't want to imply that it is always the case that we need our spiritual friends in this instance. It could be that we open *ourselves* up, through the penetrating absorption of meditation. In that way we can come up against such a sheath that we hadn't realised was there. We can come up very strongly against a view of ourselves — it's almost like in meditation you suddenly have this mirror reflection of you as you are; 'you' as you see yourself — and it is something that is not very pleasant. And you realise that; and that is very, very good, because then you can see, 'ah — that is how I see myself; that is how I project myself onto the world. I can do something about this; I can remove this offensive sheath of ignorance.'

I remember a friend of mine at Vajraloka (that is our meditation centre in Wales) telling me that one day he had this experience in meditation — it's not so subtle as a probe, this, but — as a kind of demon that appeared to him in meditation. And he actually took a sword, in his meditation practice — and it seemed to me the way he talked it wasn't just a fantasy, it was a real sort of tangible experience — he took this sword and he slashed away at this demon. It was a spontaneous urge to remove this obscuration, and I got the impression as he spoke to me that it was a very positive experience; it was an experience of destroying in order to create.

Keeping the sword to hand; sword as spade; the treasure of Manjughosha

Now, these similes from the text which I quoted to convey the operation of the Bodhicitta, or the sword of Manjughosha — they are not exhaustive. We could all, I think, reckon of at least one more way in which the sword might help us. The important thing is to have the sword always to hand; to invoke its restorative powers. It may be sufficient just to handle it; just to lay the blade against our skin and experience its healing touch. Just a glance — a real glance — at that flaming sword, or just the slightest cut, and the scales might fall away and the bonds be loosed.

Yet I just want to cover two more uses of the sword not mentioned so far; two more variations. And I want to speak finally of the 'sword as spade', and the 'sword as chisel'.

...Do I sense Manjughosha's youthful smile getting rather strained when I talk about his 'sword as spade'? A bit crude, really — the sword as spade, and the sword as chisel — but I am sure he won't mind. Spade-work is necessary. We're not going to achieve our aims in a single weekend.

Now, spade-work can be very dull and uninspiring if you don't know what you are digging for. But we *do* know. We *do* have an intimation, at least, of what we are digging for. We have some idea of the sword as subtle knife — at least, I'm saying at the end of the weekend we will have a glimpse of the sword as subtle knife — but we also need to do, as I say, a certain amount of 'spade-work'.

We have a glimpse of the bright and brave new world of eternal youthfulness of Manjughosha. We have already had that, I am sure; all of us, in some way or another. In other words, we have all experienced the treasure at first hand. Probably we wouldn't be here today if we hadn't had some intimation of the treasure. And the treasure of Manjughosha is often evoked through riches...

'He is seated dignified and gracefully poised, with both legs crossed in the vajra posture. Around his legs he wears a ruby silk robe embroidered with golden thread. Around his shoulders and waist is a white silk scarf. His long raven hair is tied up in a top-knot, and falls down around his shoulders. His hair is graced with blue lotus flowers, and he wears a five-jewelled diadem set with the diamonds of the five Buddhas, shining and scintillating.'

— I quote from a devotional ceremony compiled by an Order Member; a devotional ceremony to Manjughosha.

So now, if we have experienced the treasure but lost it, or for some reason can no longer locate it... then we have to dig for it. Sometimes we might see a faint gleam of gold shining in the clay or the soil. Other times there may be no clue to work with, so it will be harder — so faith is necessary. But the sword is very sharp, and it removes weeds and rubbish, and you can cut through the sods. It can even cut through stone.

Plotinus and Neoplatonism; sword as chisel — removing what conceals; sculpture as metaphor; going to Florence — Hitler's watercolours

So finally I am just going to refer to the other spiritual master I mentioned at the beginning of my talk — I said one was Buddhist and one was Neoplatonist — so the Neoplatonist is Plotinus.

The spade is a tool for removing what conceals, and another tool for removing what conceals is the chisel. So, finally, Manjughosha's sword as chisel...

With the spade and the chisel, you chip away; you remove what is hiding the treasure. And this is what Plotinus says:

'Withdraw yourself...' — withdraw means just take a step back — 'withdraw yourself and look, and if you don't find yourself beautiful yet, act as the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful. So what does he do? He cuts away here. He smooths there. He makes this line lighter, this other pure, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also cut away all that is excessive. Straighten all that is crooked. Bring light to all that is overcast. Labour to make one glow of beauty, and never cease chiselling your statue until there shall shine out in you from the god-like splendour of virtue — until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine.'

...What a wonderful image. Your spiritual life as a work of art — you as artist — chiselling away the obscurations to arrive at your own inner beauty.

So — yes — all the time, if we are really making the right kind of effort and progress, there are always these two aspects of the process: the chipping away at the old, and at the same time the revealing of the new. This presumably is one of the joys of the art of sculpture — the uncovering of what is hidden. In fact it becomes an overall metaphor for the artistic process in general. It is applicable to music and writing as well as the plastic arts — the releasing of the hidden form from the material that the artist is working with.

So the material that we are working in the spiritual life is *ourselves as we are*; and what we are trying to achieve is the hidden work of art that we have some intimation of. And we all know — well, I think a lot of us here know — that this has been very well illustrated in the work of the great renaissance artist Michelangelo.

One of the disadvantages these days in the FWBO — when you get to be ordained or when you're an Order Member who goes onto the ordination team — one of the disadvantages these days is you get to go to Guhyaloka which is in Spain, but when I was on the ordination support team I had the privilege of going to Tuscany in Italy. And when you went to Tuscany, one of the beauties of it was that before you went you could go to Florence and Rome (I went to Florence; I went to Rome; I went to Sienna) either on the way, or on the way back.

Now, both of the speakers on this weekend (I'm sure some of you know this story but I'm going to tell it again!) — both of the speakers on this weekend, myself and Padmavajra, were on the same support team in Tuscany in 1984. And Satyaraja was also ordained on that particular course. And towards the end of the course we all went to Florence, and I was sitting on the bus with Satyaraja and Padmavajra, and we eventually arrived in Florence and we went our separate ways... but for some strange reason, Padmavajra and his friend Satyaraja didn't end up at the Uffizi; they didn't end up at the Academy; they didn't end up at the Chapel of San Lorenzo... they ended up at an exhibition of Hitler's watercolours! ...[LAUGHTER]... I — *I* went to the Academy! ...[MORE LAUGHTER]...

...Anyway — sorry — that's a bit of a digression... I couldn't resist!

Michelangelo's 'Four Prisoners' — 'The Youthful Prisoner'; 'Atlantis' — Atlas and Perseus; being turned to stone; the old as the way we define ourselves

Now, of course, in the Academy there is that wonderful statue of David. But near that statue there are four unfinished sculptures by Michelangelo, and these four sculptures that are unfinished are known as 'The Four Prisoners'. And one of these four is a very appropriate image for what I have been talking about; it is known as 'The Youthful Prisoner'. I don't know whether Michelangelo gave it that name, but now it's called 'The Youthful Prisoner', and as the name implies it is of a youth who is partly trapped, still — and always will be — in the stone... and partly released by Michelangelo's chisel.

It is not known, I think, why Michelangelo abandoned these sculptures. Perhaps it was a fault in the marble; I don't know. But the figures are very evocative. The imprisoned youth — eyes closed, he holds his forearm over his head in a protective way. He is a tall, handsome youth, but he cannot as yet stand up to his full height. He is eternally doomed to imprisonment. He is a symbol — a symbol of growth rejected, of being permanently trapped in the prison of his own egoity.

Another of these figures is of someone called 'Atlantis', and with this one Michelangelo has sculpted out most of the legs and the trunk and one very powerful, muscular arm, and this powerful muscular arm holds up the great weight of marble in which the head is still imprisoned. This one is called 'Atlantis' — I don't know, again, whether Michelangelo called it that, or someone later. 'Atlantis', of course, refers to the lost city. But there is also the mythological association with Atlas, the Titan — the giant who was made to carry the sky on his shoulders, and whom Perseus turned to stone with the severed head of the Medusa.

Stone — at least a block of stone, before it's sculpted — suggests dead, lifeless, frozen energy. Vadanya, when he briefed me for this talk, said in his email (I quote): 'The sword of wisdom cuts away the old,' — and then Vadanya goes on to define 'the old' as 'the way we define ourselves, based on the past; labels, patterns, self-restrictions.'

The sword, he suggests, does away with old, stale ways of being, and allows us to be new

and youthful.

So I have said quite a bit about afflictions, about resentments which we can decapitate, and so on... but what *are* these stale ways of being? ...Ways of being on the way to becoming petrified and deadened. They deaden us. It is these, too, that have to be chiselled away — otherwise we have to bear the terrible weight, like the unfortunate 'Atlantis'. What a terrible strain. We put ourselves under such strain sometimes.

So, what unnecessary weight are we carrying? Isn't it time we relieved ourselves of it? Isn't it time we chiselled ourselves free?

Being stale; a flow of becoming; work in progress — the eternal quest

I don't know what these stale ways of being are, necessarily — you have to decide for yourselves. It may be ways we talk to ourselves about ourselves, and we set labels and limits on ourselves, and habitually we talk about ourselves in a particular way, and we convince ourselves that we're 'like this'. And we enter this (as it were) stale way of being. ...And we don't enjoy it.

This is very general, I realise, but I'm trying to encourage you, yourselves, to have a go this weekend; to ask yourself, do you experience yourself in this way? — as 'being' in a stale sort of way?

If we do, we can take advantage of the sword of Manjughosha, and chisel away and reveal the hidden form. And that way, as we work, knowing that Manjughosha also holds the book of Wisdom, hopefully we will have a glimpse of the truth — the transcendental truth — that form is emptiness, and emptiness is form. This form that we impose on ourselves — these stale ways of being — they are empty; they have no inherent self-nature. We try to cling onto them, but we are just a flow of experiences; a flow of becoming.

And we eventually begin to realise, as we work in this way, that it is all 'work in progress' — it is *always* work in progress — and that the work is *eternally* in progress. We've never finished! It is eternally challenging, and at the same time eternally satisfying; but we can *never* put the tools down and say, 'that's it — I've done it — I've cleared away all that there is to be cleared away.'

Just as the artist is never satisfied... when he has finished a work of art, the great artist always starts a new one. It is an eternal quest. It is never the 'perfect self'. There is always the fresh challenge. We will forever be cutting our way into new worlds; brandishing, wielding the sword of Manjughosha to cut our way into new ways of being.

...But that is Padmavajra's territory... and I am going to leave him to tell you how you cut your way into these new worlds of being... so I'll just finish by wishing you all... 'Happy chipping! Happy hacking! Happy shaving and piercing! Happy uncovering! — with the wonderful sword of Manjughosha!'