

## **Touching the Void** *by Jnanavaca*

Audio available at: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM697>

*Talk given at Padmaloka Retreat Centre, 2004*

*'All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity. But the dreamers of the day are dangerous men; for they may act their dream with open eyes to make it possible.'*

So there are some words by T.E. Lawrence (he of Lawrence of Arabia fame) from his book, *'The Seven Pillars of Wisdom'*. I chose those words because they are used in the preface of a book called *'Touching the Void'* by Joe Simpson, and I am going to talk about that book in this talk.

But, before I do that, I want to reiterate something that Vadanya was saying yesterday: that the archetype of the hero, or the heroic quest, is just one way of talking about the spiritual life. I have come to realise that every time I – or anybody – try to say anything about the Dharma or the spiritual life, it is partial. It is almost like you have to keep correcting yourself. You say one thing and then you have to say, 'oh, well, I don't quite mean that, or at least not in all circumstances, or actually there's this opposite view as well that's equally valid'. So, it's always partial.

But nevertheless I think the heroic quest is a very good and apt way of talking about the spiritual life. So I am going to use the story of Joe Simpson. He is a man from Sheffield. He wrote this book: *'Touching the Void'*. You might have read the book; you might have seen the film (it was recently made into a film). He is a mountaineer, a writer, and now works also as a motivational speaker to businessmen, I believe. And his story, together with his friend and colleague and fellow-mountaineer, a man called Simon Yates – *their* story – is a story of heroism; it's a story of a heroic quest. Not necessarily a spiritual quest... but I think it is a very good metaphor or analogy for the spiritual quest.

So, if you will indulge me, I want to use it as an analogy. Don't take it literally – I'm not saying we all have to climb mountains – I wouldn't be here if that was what the spiritual life was about, frankly! But I think it is a fantastic illustration, and if you give me poetic license I'd like to try and draw out some of the analogies of the spiritual truths.

So Joe Simpson and his friend Simon Yates, in their twenties (I think they were probably about twenty-five or twenty-six) – young, adventurous, confident men – went to Peru and decided to scale this particular mountain which... I'm not sure how it's pronounced... I think it's something like the 'Siula Grande'. They decided to scale this mountain that had never been scaled by this particular face – the West Face of the mountain had never been conquered – this particular mountain was 21,000 feet high, and the West Face was seen to be particularly treacherous and probably impossible to climb.

So they prepare for this ascent; they realise that they need to prepare, a bit like Hsuan-Tsang was preparing. Perhaps they do it a bit more consciously and less mysteriously than seemed to happen in Hsuan-Tsang's life, but they prepare for this ascent. They realise that it's full of danger. They are good friends: they trust each other, and they trust each other's abilities. They establish a base camp. There is a third man, called Richard... I can't remember his second name. He stays at base camp looking after their possessions, and they do little forays, little short... uh... I don't know what you do... run up a mountain? Walk up a mountain? – to become acclimatised, and test their equipment, etcetera.

I was just thinking that, in a way, climbing a mountain is a good analogy, isn't it, for the spiritual life? It is often used as an analogy for the spiritual life. You see this goal – this mountain – in the distance... you are attracted by the beauty of it... and then you move towards it, and you have to start climbing.

In other ways, it's a very simplistic and simple metaphor that probably doesn't do justice to anybody's life, and certainly doesn't do justice to the complexities of the spiritual life. But as an image it illustrates idealism, I think. Climbing a mountain illustrates something to do with having an ideal – an impossibly lofty ideal – an ideal that seems sort of crazy, and... well... anti-Confucianism. It's not the sort of thing that you would normally, out of common sense, choose to do.

And I think that's fantastic – partly because we don't live in a very idealistic age, do we? This is why I think it is important to try and re-emphasise our ideals, because even us Buddhists, or wayfarers in the spiritual life, are influenced, I think, by the fact that we don't live in a very idealistic age. In fact, I think we live in a rather cynical age, but it's so much around us that I think it's even hard to see the cynicism for what it is.

I was ordained in 1999 in India, and one of the most moving things about being ordained in India was the *un*-cynical nature of the response that you have there. It is just fantastic; it's tremendously powerful. At my public ordination... well, it was all advertised in a bit of a hurry because I think the dates had been chosen at the last minute, etcetera... and this retreat centre was somewhere outside of Nagpur... (I'm digressing, but indulge me!) ...and so for my public ordination they hurriedly put up some notices and posters. And between five and ten thousand people came!... [LAUGHTER] ...from surrounding cities and neighbourhoods and villages. And they were all Buddhist, and they were all celebrating. I mean, they probably didn't know me or the other men who were being ordained – there were six of us – but they were celebrating! Well... partly they were having a picnic... [LAUGHTER] ...but they were celebrating the spiritual ideal! And you don't get that in the West; not in my experience.

But, also, it's not just a *cynical* age that we live in, is it, really? It is also an age that is almost defined by our desire, our need, for comfort and for security. It's an age of comfort and complacency, in a way, isn't it? And consumerism, of course. The 'Three C's' are probably Comfort, Complacency and Consumerism. That seems to be, again, an endemic

thing. And certainly I recognise that in myself. I must admit I'm not as cynical as perhaps some people around us are, but I *am* really, really drawn to wanting comfort, and I do get very, very complacent. And – well – consumerism doesn't pass me by either.... And yes, I think that is partly the age we live in, and partly my temperament.

I think there are possibly deeper reasons, though. Perhaps when we have encountered something like Buddhism – the Dharma – perhaps we have sort of overcome at least the hump of our cynical age, at least to some extent, but I think there are deeper reasons that stop us being idealistic. And I think we encounter them again and again in our spiritual lives. I'm just thinking about how we can have fears – fears of failing – so we don't hold onto an ideal because we might never achieve it. Or we have fears of rejection, because being idealistic means opening up to other people, being receptive to something that might be higher than ourselves. And perhaps we have fears to do with being vulnerable; being rejected. Perhaps fears of admitting that we don't have all the answers. To be a successful man today, perhaps we feel that we need all the answers, we need to have life 'sorted'. And – well – spiritual life isn't about having life 'sorted'. Quite the opposite.

So to go back to Joe Simpson and Simon Yates... I think they were naive; they were naive heroes. They were young – how could they not be naive? They didn't have a lot of life experience. They didn't have a lot of mountaineering experience. But they *were* idealistic, in a very inspiring way. And cynicism is no answer to that naivety.

Let me read you something about ideals, from another man:

*'To enquire after the meaning or object of one's own existence, or of creation generally, has always seemed to me absurd from an objective point of view, and yet everybody has certain ideals which determine the direction of his endeavours and his judgements. In this sense I have never looked upon ease and happiness as ends in themselves. Such an ethical basis I call more proper for a herd of swine. The ideals which have lighted me on my way, and time after time have given me new courage to face life cheerfully, have been Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Without the sense of fellowship with men of like mind, of preoccupation with the objective, the eternally unattainable in the field of art and scientific research, life would have seemed to me empty. The ordinary objects of human endeavour – property, outward success, luxury – have always seemed to me contemptible.'*

Those are very, very strong words; they're words by Albert Einstein. Einstein is a sort of hero of mine (I've been reading about him over the last wee while) and he has some very, very sound things to say about life – about the spiritual life, actually. In some ways he's a mature hero, in the way that perhaps Joe Simpson, as he was setting out for his climb, certainly wasn't, at the start. So I'm going to keep coming back to Einstein as a sort of thread running through this talk.

But I just want to touch on my own experience of idealism. As a teenager, I used to read about Buddhism – Zen Buddhism mostly – and be genuinely very inspired. But mixed in with that there was quite a lot of – well – not just naivety, but egotism. I fancied myself

as a Zen master, wandering round hitting people with sticks every time they moved and pronouncing on the nature of reality at every opportunity. I sort of thought, 'ah, yeah – that's what I'll be when I grow up!'

And I can remember when I was about nineteen or so I did join a Zen group for a while, and it was run by this very impressive man called Clive Sherlock. He was a doctor and he ran this Zen group. And I used to go along of an evening and just wait – just be convinced that he was going to recognise me as the next Zen master in his lineage! I was just kind of waiting for that... and of course he never did! And I can remember one occasion where – well, I used to park my bike outside his front gate, and my bike padlock got locked or something – so I had to go back and knock on the front door and ask for some hot water so that I could put it onto the padlock to thaw it, to put the key in, etcetera. And he gave me some hot water, and then *patted me on the back!* And for days afterwards I thought that was a sign... [LAUGHTER] ...He'd patted me on the back! That was the sign that I'd been waiting for!... [LAUGHTER] ... So – yeah – that's a little aside...

And another little aside, just about idealism... I do think that we have to look at how we hold ideals. There has been much talk of this in our Order and in the movement over the last few years; the last couple of years particularly. And – well – it is true that you can hold noble ideals in an unhelpful way. We can hold them so tightly and so harshly that they stop being helpful, either to ourselves or to other people. I think that is something to watch out for. If we find ourselves in a situation, for example, where we're just getting angry or resentful with ourselves or with other people in the name of idealism, then something is going wrong. Something is not quite right. If we find ourselves sitting there getting angry with ourselves because we can't feel enough metta in the Metta Bhavana, then something's gone wrong, hasn't it – something's very amiss. So, that's just a sort of warning caveat about holding ideals. It's not an easy thing to do.

To resume the story of Joe Simpson and Simon Yates... they navigate their way through incredible dangers – and remember it's uncharted terrain; they don't really know what the layout of this west face is. They find themselves on crevasses – on powder snow that crumbles as soon as you touch it – huge walls of this powder snow that are completely un-navigable. They manage to find their way, using all their skills and resources, up to the top of the summit. They scale the West Face – a huge achievement.

And then of course they start to descend. And the descent proves not as straightforward as they might have thought. They are trying to come down by a slightly different route that looked like an easier route, and actually it proves pretty precarious and dangerous. And quite early on in the descent, a disaster happens. Joe Simpson falls, and he breaks his leg in really quite a nasty way: the knee breaks, and he talks about the bone sort of going that way – it sort of slides up his leg – so that his knee is just completely contorted, and bone is crunched on bone and slid up his leg.

So they are nearly at the top of this mountain – they haven't descended very far – and he's broken his leg.

And, immediately, he realises that actually this is it. He can't get down. He is not going to make it. All his mountaineering knowledge tells him that he's dead now. This is it. Simon Yates catches up with him, and says: 'What's wrong?', and they look at each other, and Joe just says: 'I've broken my leg'. He's in agony of course, but he manages to hold it together and say, 'I've broken my leg'. And there's a look – they don't say anything – they just look at each other for a little too long, and they both know what it means. And neither want to actually say: 'Well, this is it'. Joe is waiting for the moment where Simon will say, 'Ok, mate – I'm going to go down. I can't help you. I am going to have to descend on my own and leave you here'. (And there's no way that a rescue party could have got to them in time, etcetera.)

So they're waiting for that. Joe's waiting for that moment. But it doesn't happen; that moment doesn't happen. Instead... well – what Joe starts doing initially is hopping. He hops on the route that they were trying to descend. And of course he falls at every hop. And when he falls, he can't help but fall on his broken leg, which is agony – and he gets up and hops again... and falls again... until he works out a way of hopping that enables him to stay upright long enough, using axes as walking sticks, etcetera.

And then they get to this point (and Simon's waiting for him) which is more of a sheer drop, or more of a descent, that there's no way you can hop down. And what they do – what Simon says – is that they've got rope, and they're going to tie... well, he ties himself to Joe, digs himself a little sort of seat in the mountain snow, and winches Joe down three hundred feet, which is what the extent of their rope is. So he winches Joe down, and they decide that they're going to do this – they're going to lower themselves down the mountain – and then Simon will follow, climbing down, and then winch Joe down another three hundred feet.

Of course Simon is risking his life in this, because there's nothing holding him. He is literally carrying Joe's weight – the weight of his body – as he's winching him down, sort of holding onto snow; digging himself a seat and holding onto snow. And there's three thousand feet to go... and they can do three hundred feet at a time, because that's what their rope allows. And it's getting towards dark; they've got a few hours till dark.

So, Simon's doing this as fast as he can. Meanwhile Joe is in agony at every 'lowering' – he's banging his leg against the mountainside and he's in agony, screaming out, and Simon is just going as fast as he can. They do this 'lowering' nine times, each time then stopping to dig a snow seat. Their fingers are becoming frost-bitten, so Simon is having trouble holding on to the rope, let alone taking any weight...

So... yeah... I just want to pause there in the story... [LAUGHTER] ...

I find this – well – it's incredible, isn't it? All common sense would say that, you know, he's dead... and neither of them give in to common sense, and it's very moving the way that Simon is willing to risk his life; literally *tie* his life to the life of his friend. And it's done in a very unsentimental way. I don't know if you have seen the film, but you get a

sense in the film of them being both very unsentimental, practical men, not given to displays of very much emotion, or talking about their emotions... you know. They're from Sheffield... [LAUGHTER] ...

But I think that this lowering, this tying themselves together and lowering, is the first stage in their idealism being matured. No longer is it such a laugh to climb this mountain, and no longer is it such a glorious adventure. Now, actually, they're up against something far more dangerous and real. So, it's an image for that.

I also find it a very powerful image for our interdependence. For the first time they are realising that actually they have to rely on each other – or at least Joe has to rely on Simon. He can't do it alone – it isn't a single endeavour – which is very true, isn't it, of the spiritual life, and probably of anything that we want to do in our lives.

But the other thing that it reminds me of is just *not quitting at the first hurdle*. How tempting it would be to just give up then, and say, 'ok – well – that's it'. But heroes don't do that, do they? Heroes don't do that in their stories. They stay with it against all the odds. They find creative solutions against all the odds... and they're intelligent in how they do that, so it's not just a bludgeoning on – although it does come to that later on – but it's an intelligent way of working.

I was just thinking, in terms of my own life, how actually tempting it is to quit when the going gets tough. When I left my job about seven years back and worked in the Centre team at the London Buddhist Centre, raising money (at the time) for a retreat centre – Vajrasana retreat centre – Vajrasana retreat centre was just an ideal that we in the Sangha at the LBC talked about. Actually Ratnaghosha had held it up as an ideal: it was his dream, his vision. He had decided that we needed a new retreat centre that was going to be beautiful, it was going to be capable of holding a hundred people, it was going to be instrumental in spreading the Dharma in London, it was going to be tremendous.

And I was going to raise money for it. I had no experience with fundraising. And I don't really have that sort of talent, actually. But I went into it full of gung-ho glory, or at least as much as I could muster... and – well – it didn't work out as we had hoped. All the funding that we applied for didn't come through. I knew a few rich, influential people... and they didn't feel very inspired to give! And the Sangha was inspired, but nobody was able to give very much. We were trying to raise half a million pounds, and after the first year we were struggling to reach one hundred thousand: and we had given ourselves two years to do it in. And – well – I just decided we weren't going to do it. I just thought, 'we might as well give up now – let's cut our losses – let's not embarrass ourselves further... I could go back and get a job!' ...[LAUGHTER] ...

And Ratnaghosha didn't give up. And I am just very, very grateful for him, for not giving up. But not only did he not give up; he kept on coming up with creative, inspired solutions – intelligent solutions – that kept re-framing the project, re-framing what we were doing, and carrying on.

And actually *yes*, in just over two years we *did* have a retreat centre, that did cost us just under half a million pounds – probably half a million pounds by the time we had got it up and going; and it's a very beautiful place now. Not quite for a hundred people, but nevertheless it has been very, very important in the life of many, many people around the LBC and further afield.

...Just a little example that came to mind from my own life, of somebody not giving up.

But I want to read a little bit more from Einstein. He talks about this interdependence, this recognition that his life is inextricably dependent on the lives of others, in a very eloquent and lovely way:

*'What an extraordinary situation is that of us mortals. Each of us is here for a brief sojourn, for what purpose he knows not what, though he sometimes thinks he feels it. But from the point of view of daily life, without going any deeper, we exist for our fellow men. In the first place for those on whose smiles and welfare all our happiness depends; and next for all those unknown to us personally, to whose destinies we are bound up by the tie of sympathy. A hundred times every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life depend on the labours of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received and am still receiving.'*

...A very lovely, humble sentiment, from – after all – somebody who was an outstanding figure.

Ok... so there were nine of these 'lowerings'... Actually they haven't reached the bottom of this thing, but they know that it is roughly three thousand feet, so the tenth lowering might be the last lowering, they're hoping. But it's getting dark now, and actually common sense would have said 'stop'. In fact, *good* sense would have said, 'stop: dig yourself a snow hole and bed down for the night' – because it is not only dark, it's snowing. They can't see very far, they can't hear each other more than a few feet away, so as soon as the lowering starts they've lost sight and sound of each other.

But they think, 'oh, yeah, one more lowering...' – because it might be the last one. Three thousand feet: ten lowerings. And so on they go, and they are rushing now. The frost-bite etcetera is getting to them. Joe talks about Simon's hands being black, or two of his fingers being black. So, they are rushing...

And – well – another disaster happens. Unbeknownst to them there is a sheer drop – a cliff – actually it's overhanging, so it's not even sheer, it's sort of going the other way. Joe is just dropped over this drop... and falls completely into space. He is left hanging there by this rope, too far away from the sides of the cliff to try and crawl back. He has gone over a drop that Simon can't see, and there's no way of communicating. So he is just left hanging there. And if Simon were to follow him, they would both fall, and they would both die. It's a sheer drop into (as far as you can see) unending space. He can't see where it's going. So he's just left hanging.

And of course Simon doesn't know what has happened. He's standing up there thinking, 'why have I suddenly felt...?' – you know. He realises Joe must have fallen, because he's now got the full body weight that he's carrying at the end of this rope, but he doesn't know why there is no movement; why there's no tugging of the rope to say 'come down', etcetera. There is nothing. He's stuck. And of course, it's getting harder and harder to hold on. He is being dragged, pulled, sliding, from this snow seat that he's sitting in.

...Ok, so I'll stop there for a bit... [LAUGHTER]...

...So, what came to mind was this image of hanging in space – hanging for dear life at the end of a rope – in what might as well be infinite space all around you. And maybe that is an apt image for what can happen in the spiritual life. Actually it's probably an apt image for what can happen in life generally. Probably we are all going to encounter a time when it feels like we are hanging at the end of a rope, off a cliff, with no way to move, nowhere to go. Perhaps it is more acute when you are trying to live the spiritual life, because you're committed to developing awareness; to facing your mind and not fudging issues, not hiding from reality. So, perhaps it's kind of worse.

And the other thing that came to mind is... well... things go wrong.

I know that I still have this naive notion that 'I'm trying to practice the Dharma, so things won't go wrong' – yeah? 'Things will be fine: life will work out, because I'm trying to be a good Buddhist. I'm doing the Metta Bhavana – surely that should be enough! Things won't go wrong...' But actually, life promises us dukkha. The Dharma says that, doesn't it? Life promises us dukkha. Samsara *will* go wrong; and we're still in Samsara.

That reflection got me thinking about Amoghasiddhi, because one of the things about Amoghasiddhi is that he is said to promise you unobstructed success. You hold on to Amoghasiddhi as your archetype, as your ideal, as your vision of the embodiment of the Dharma, and there should be unobstructed success. So what does that mean? What is this contradiction between the Dharma promising you dukkha, and this figure of Amoghasiddhi?

The conclusion I have come to, tentatively, is that it sort of depends on what you mean by success, and that sort of depends on what you mean by your goal. If our goal is Enlightenment for the sake of all beings, then actually *everything* that happens to us can be used to further that goal – yeah? We can use whatever difficulties arise, creatively. And the Dharma sort of points to that, doesn't it? Because on the arising of dukkha we can either go round and round this wheel of life, or we can respond creatively, with *sradhha*, and move up the spiral path.

So perhaps it depends on how we respond. Maybe there is unobstructed success if our goal is really Enlightenment; awareness; kindness; growth. Maybe there *is* unobstructed success. Maybe everything that happens can be turned into an opportunity. It can sound like a glib thing to say: it's easier said, isn't it? But maybe that is the symbolism of Amoghasiddhi's 'unobstructed success'.



Ok... So, Simon is wondering what to do. It's dark; there's a snow-storm; he's not sure that he can hang on much longer; and if he falls, he'll die – and Joe will die as well.

Joe is at the bottom of this rope waiting for Simon to fall. He knows that sooner or later Simon won't be able to hang on, and they're both going to go tumbling down into this void.

And then Simon remembers he's got a knife in his pack... and he decides to cut the rope. And this has been the crucial point of the story, in a way. This is the pivotal point of the story. In the book, Simon says that actually it was instinctive; he didn't have to deliberate. He realised that he had a knife, and it was obvious what he needed to do, which was to cut the rope. And it was also obvious to him that that meant that Joe died – that he let his friend drop, and die. Perhaps it's a bit like Vadanya's Jade Gate – or Hsuan-Tsang's Jade Gate. This is the point of no return, the decisive moment. And I find it interesting that this rope that had been, in a way, a symbol for their security, their interdependence, their friendship, has now become a tie that threatens to kill the both of them – and what has to happen is that it needs to be cut. It needs to be cut so that at least Simon can live; one of them can live.

And so, he cuts the rope... In the book it said that he just has to touch the rope with the knife, and it's so taut and cold that it just snaps. There is almost no effort needed. You just touch the rope with this knife, and it snaps.

I had a few reflections on that. The first one that came to mind is just our need for decisiveness. Sometimes we need to just *act*, don't we? Sometimes you can hang on, not acting, until it's too late; it becomes too late to then do anything creative. So sometimes – even though the decision doesn't seem easy, or even if you don't know if it's the right one – sometimes we have to *act*.

The key thing, though, is that Simon takes responsibility for his action. Throughout the rest of the book you see that he takes responsibility for cutting this rope. He knows that it is an action that he will be criticised for, in this mountaineering community. He knows that people will say, 'you saved your own life but killed your friend, and this solidarity which is so essential in the mountaineering community... you broke that... you transgressed some sort of unwritten rule in doing so'. He knows this, but he takes responsibility. He decides that this is the sensible thing to do.

So all I am saying is that perhaps at crucial times in our lives where we do have to make decisions that we don't know are going to be the right ones, perhaps all that we can do is *take* them, and try and take responsibility for the consequences of them, even though we can't foresee them. If we find ourselves getting into blame – blaming ourselves, blaming other people, blaming the situation – then probably we are not taking sufficient responsibility. I think there is something critical about the spiritual life in that – because we want it all to be worked out for us, don't we? We want somebody else, sometimes, to make that difficult decision for us, so that we can blame them later when it goes wrong –

yeah?

Simon does make it back to base camp. He is racked with guilt. At times he doesn't know what to do with himself. He does actually look for Joe, but can't see him. On his descent he looks for Joe, can't see him, decides he is dead, and makes it back to base camp. On the way back he considers lying to Richard, who is, remember, back at base camp. He considers lying and saying, 'look – Joe fell – he fell into a crevasse, and that's all that happened' – because if he did that, then he wouldn't have to face all this criticism, all this awful publicity. He keeps thinking of Joe's mother. What is he going to say to Joe's mother – 'I cut the rope'? Is he going to have the guts to say that to her? So he considers lying... and then decides to tell the truth. He decides that actually he has no choice but to tell the truth.

If I can have a wee aside, again... I'm going to go back to me leaving my job. The reason I want to go back to that is – well – you'll see the reason....

When I left the job, it felt, for me, a critical decision in my life. It felt like a point of no return. I had been working in this secure job in I.T. for a large retailer, earning a very decent wage, for ten years. I decided to leave over a period of a couple of years, and I was trying to take responsibility for my decision, realising what I was doing, as it were.

But I remember this moment where I had to go and tell one of my bosses – he wasn't my direct line manager, but he was one of my bosses – I was going to have to go and tell him that I'd resigned. His name was S \_\_\_\_\_. I was frightened of S \_\_\_\_\_. S \_\_\_\_\_ was – well – a corporate bully, actually. A very, very intelligent man, but he could be incredibly nasty. I've never met anybody who could be as bullying as he was; outrageous ways that he'd lose his temper; humiliate people in meetings, in public... reduce people to tears and think nothing of it. He was also a very, very good businessman – probably because he just frightened people! – in some ways, anyway. He was successful at a lot of things that he did. And I hadn't been working for S \_\_\_\_\_ that long. I had never really crossed swords with him. We had had a reasonably ok relationship thus far... but I knew that he was going to blow a gasket when I told him that I was going to leave. He would go ballistic, as far as I could tell. And I decided that the decent thing to do was to go in and tell him myself, rather than wait until he heard. Maybe that was the safer thing to do. But I really didn't want to do it!

So I booked an appointment, I went into his office, and it was then that I noticed that on a bookshelf in his office – I'd been in his office several times, but never noticed this – there was a rupa, a figure of Amoghasiddhi, just sitting on this bookshelf!... [LAUGHTER] ... I knew S \_\_\_\_\_ had travelled in the Far East, in East Asia, and obviously he had got this rupa from somewhere, I don't know where... and instantly I felt that it was all right!... [LAUGHTER] ...I did feel fearless – just for a little while – and I told him that I was resigning. His face changed colour as I told him... [LAUGHTER] ... he went scarlet, literally, as I said, 'er, S \_\_\_\_\_, I've come to say that I'm going to be leaving...' – because he had thought I was going to come and update him on the project that we were working on.

And his first question was, 'Where are you going?' And of course I realised that his concern was that I was going to go to another competitor retailer and sell all our secrets, as it were – the secrets of how we did things – not that I knew very many!

...[LAUGHTER] ... but that was his fear. And I just said, 'look, I've been a Buddhist for a few years now, and I want to make that more of a full time commitment. I'm going to go and do fundraising for the London Buddhist Centre'. And he just melted! This man just melted, and became the most delightful, charming presence... [LAUGHTER]

What he said was... he had built up this direct-selling business, and he said to me: 'All this that we have been working for, it's nothing. It's meaningless. And what you're doing has more meaning than anything I've ever done... and I wish you well!'

And I thought, 'oh my *goodness!*'... [LAUGHTER] ... And he said, 'If you ever need any help – if you need equipment, computer equipment, whatever you need – don't hesitate to come and ask, and I'll see what I can do.' And I was speechless...

Anyway that was my little encounter with Amoghasiddhi in S\_\_\_\_\_ 's office, that I thought I'd bring in.

Ok... I've got quite a bit to do so I'll move on...

...The rope is cut, and Joe just falls. He falls, as far as he is concerned, to his death... He screams into this void... It is actually worse than just falling, because he hits snow, and falls into a crevasse in the ice – a crack in the ice – maybe about twenty-five feet wide.

But the next thing he knows, he hits ice – he hits hard ground, after having fallen about a hundred feet. And he's still conscious. He knows he is conscious because he is in agonising pain. He's fallen on his leg. He's in agonising pain; it's dark; all he knows is he is in this crevasse. He doesn't know what he's got around him; he can't see around him.

It turns out he is on a little ice bridge in the crevasse – there is a thin, narrow little bridge that he has fallen on and landed on and is lying on, sprawled on his front and in precarious danger of falling off. And looking down, it's just unending blackness. And he spends the rest of that night clinging to this bridge, thinking, 'ok – it's going to end like this, is it? I'm going to die in the dark, in the cold, in this crevasse, on my own. This is how it's ending.'

And he sobs... and he screams... and he knows that nobody can hear him. Simon will think he is dead. He can't be seen in this crevasse, even though he has only fallen about fifty feet into it. There is nothing he can do. He has this little torch, and he thinks, 'maybe I can climb out', and he has four attempts – remember he's got this leg that is twisted and in agony – he has four attempts at putting his ice screw into the ice and trying to haul himself out, each time sliding back onto the ice bridge... and he finally gives up. There is no way up, and no way back.

So he spends this night on this ice bridge... It feels like the spiritual equivalent of a 'dark night of the soul'. There is nothing. He's alone. It is the 'existential nightmare' writ large. He waits until dawn, until he can see light above him, and he decides that he can't stay there. If he is going to die, he wants to die on the move, not sitting waiting to die of cold, hunger and thirst on this ice bridge.

So he decides he's going to take what rope he's got, and abseil down. He can't go up, so he is going to go down. As far as he knows, the drop is perhaps thousands of feet. His rope is a few hundred feet. And at the end of the rope he is going to let go – because there is nothing else he can do.

So he starts to crawl or abseil down; to descend into nothingness... And – well – it's obvious this is an archetypal image, isn't it? This whole story seems to be full of archetypal images of descent. They have climbed this mountain, they've achieved this incredible feat, but actually what's difficult is the descent – and he has to go deeper into the darkness, because he has no choice. He has put himself in this situation; he's walking (or abseiling) into the unknown, being prepared to lose everything; being prepared to die.

I was just thinking that in the spiritual life it does seem often to be the case that things get harder before they get easier... Or perhaps they just carry on getting harder. It depends on individuals; it seems to be different. But often, after we make a commitment – after we pass a point of no return – things seem to get harder. Vadanya was talking about the sort of 'archetypal' forces in the universe that seem to come to help us – and that's true – but there also seem to be, very often, forces that come to resist; forces within ourselves and forces outside, that seem to resist us moving towards our ideals.

...I don't really have very much advice to say, apart from – well – we have to carry on, don't we? We have to carry on, in the hope that we can become more integrated in ourselves, can overcome the obstacles, see those obstacles as somehow opportunities, use whatever resources we have, and not despair.

In Joe's case, he runs out of rope, and looks down... and actually there is a floor below him – a snow-covered floor. He can't believe his good fortune, and he lands and rests on this floor... until he realises it's a *false* floor... [LAUGHTER] ... It's this floor of snow, but actually it's like a false ceiling. The crevasse is still dropping away under him. But, nevertheless, he is able to rest on it; and looking up he is able to see that in this ice chamber that he's in there's a way out – a cone-shaped tunnel of ice – and through the end of it he can see sunlight... and he decides that he might be able to crawl out.

So this is what he does. He starts crawling towards this light – and it *is* crawling. Every step is agonisingly slow and painful. Let me just read a little bit of what he says. He is describing one step:

*'...I was resting on my axes, looking at my good leg buried in the snow. I tried lifting the injured leg up parallel with it, and groaned as the knee crunched and refused to bend properly, leaving the boot about six inches lower than the good foot. Pain flared up as I*

*leant down and dug a step in the snow. I tamped it down as much as possible, then dug a smaller step below it. When I had finished I planted both axes in the slope above, gritted my teeth, and heaved my burning leg up until the boot rested in the lower step. Bracing myself on the axes, I made a convulsive hop off my good leg, pressing my arms hard down for extra thrust... A searing pain burst from my knee as my weight momentarily came onto it, and then faded as the good leg found a foot-hold on the highest step... I shouted an obscenity, which echoed comically round the chamber; then I bent down to dig another two steps, and repeat the pattern...'*

...So, that's one step. It takes five hours of those steps for him to crawl up this cone, which was at forty-five degrees, up into the light... and he makes it.

So he gets down; he gets down almost to the point where the base camp was. He doesn't know whether Simon will be there; whether the tents will be there. He doesn't want to know, actually. He doesn't want to look, just in case they're not there. He can't face them not being there. Actually he does look, but can't see, because it's dark when he gets there, and there's another snow storm – so he can't see.

So he collapses. He collapses in exhaustion... he gives up... until he wakes up to the acrid smell of excrement and urine. And this acts as a sort of 'smelling salt' for him – he wakes up and thinks, 'why am I covered in excrement?' And he realises, to his humiliation, that he has crawled through his own excrement, because he has crawled through the latrine area of the base camp.

Perhaps I'll just say, very briefly, that that humiliation seems to be another part of his maturing. Again, archetypally it feels very significant that this is what wakes him up: all that egotism has to crawl through excrement to be saved, in a way.

I remember Padmavajra giving a talk saying that he felt that experiences of humiliation were close to experiences of insight; and I remember thinking, 'Rubbish!'... [LAUGHTER] ... And what it was, was I just didn't want to acknowledge that! I don't know about the truth of that... but I do know that I *have* experienced humiliations, and they have led to some sort of growth, I think. They have led to some sort of maturing.

I was going to talk about one of my key humiliations... but I think I've run out of time... [LAUGHTER] ... [AUDIENCE MEMBER: 'Go on!'] ... All right – I'll just... it's actually not a very big humiliation, it's a sort of embarrassment... a very public embarrassment...

...I was on a winter retreat (the LBC holds these big winter retreats, which some of you may have been on – 120 people every year, over Christmas – and I'm going on one soon...) and I was a mitra – a very keen, idealistic mitra – supporting this retreat. The last night of the retreat, we have a big festive puja – it's New Year's Eve, we stay up till midnight – it's a confession puja, so people write down things that they want to leave behind, and we burn [the pieces of paper] in this big bonfire. We have got to the puja, and there are people sitting on both sides of the shrine, with this sort of walkway or gangway in the middle, and I am sitting quite close to the front. Whoever is leading the puja points

out to me that we haven't got a big bowl to hold the confessions – the pieces of paper – in. So I say, 'No worries – I'll go and get one!'

I go off, rush to the kitchen to get a bowl, and go to the loo on my way, and come back. By the time I come back they're getting ready to salute the shrine, so everybody's standing facing the shrine.

...What happened was that I'd been sitting in meditation, and I hadn't done my trousers up... my trouser button, or whatever, was undone... [AUDIENCE BEGINS TO CHUCKLE] ...but I hadn't *noticed*, either... [LAUGHTER] ... so I'm carrying this bowl, which is quite a large bowl... it took both hands to carry this bowl... [LAUGHTER] ...and I start walking towards the shrine.

So I'm coming up this gangway with this large bowl... walking... and I suddenly think, 'my goodness, my trousers feel like they're... *slipping!*' ... And I'm halfway there by now and I think, 'well... I'm not sure I can *do* anything about this!' – because, you know... do you stop? Put the bowl down? Put your trousers...? What do you do?

So I kind of... in a fit of panic, carried on... [LAUGHTER]... and I got to the shrine, carrying this bowl... and they just went, 'Zoopfh!' [...RAUCOUS LAUGHTER...]

So I'm facing this shrine with my trousers round my ankles, holding a huge bowl, with 120 people in the room... who all burst out in spontaneous applause!! [LOUD LAUGHTER] ... It was timed to perfection! ...Anyway that was one of my embarrassing moments – it's not particularly, in some ways, humiliating – it's just embarrassing! And I'm sure I've had worse humiliations... they're just not so public!

Anyway... so Joe wakes up, covered in his own excrement, and shouts out, in agony and despair: '*Simon!*' He just shouts for Simon... for anybody, actually... but he shouts, '*Simon!*'.

He says he didn't want to die alone – that was what was so despairing. He knew he was going to die; he just didn't want to die alone. He wanted to be held. He didn't even want to live – he even says that at that point it was as if living and dying didn't seem that different. It didn't seem to matter whether one died or not; he just wanted to be held.

He also says, in the film, that when he cried out, '*Simon!*' – when he actually uttered that cry – he felt that he lost something... and what he lost, he says, is he lost himself. In that moment of crying out he lost himself – that's what he says. I'm not sure exactly what he meant, but it seems to me very, very significant that after this six day journey up and down the mountain – he lost three stone in these few days, so you can sort of imagine the physical endurance that he had to put up with – he loses himself. There's a spiritual death...

*'...The true value of a human being is determined primarily by the measure and the sense in which he has attained to liberation from the self...'*

– That's Einstein again.

...And of course Joe didn't know whether Simon would still be there. Actually there was no reason for Simon to be there. It had been at least two days since Simon would have reached base camp, and they would have gone.

...But Simon *was* there. Something had kept him there, but he didn't know what. Richard had been saying to Simon: *'Let's go – look, there's no point, Joe's dead, let's go.'* And Simon kept saying, *'Let's just wait a little bit longer...one more day... one more day...'*

And Simon hears Joe cry out. He is finally heard; and of course he is found – and held. There is a very moving description of the mutual empathy – the love, the concern – that they show for each other. Joe is breaking down in sobs... and Simon is sobbing in between expletives.

But what I found even more moving is that one of Joe's first responses was to thank Simon, and to reassure him that he did the right thing in cutting the rope – that he was grateful – and telling him to not feel guilty. That was one of his first responses... and it's just very, very lovely. He is exhausted to the point that – you know – he can't think; and he is about to fall asleep. And he says [in the book]:

*There seemed to me something important still to do before I slept, but I was losing the struggle to keep my eyes open... then I remembered.*

*'Simon!' I said.*

*'What?'*

*'You saved my life, you know. It must have been terrible for you that night, and I don't blame you. I don't blame you – you had no choice. I understand that. I understand why you thought I was dead. I understand what you did. You did all that you could have done... Thanks for getting me down.'*

– Just tremendous... And then sleep overtakes him... although he looks at Simon, and there are tears in Simon's eyes as Simon describes what it was like for him. And Joe says: *'It's over now – it's over.'* And Simon says: *'Yes.'*

*'...He said it in a choked whisper, and I felt the unstoppable flood of hot tears filling my eyes. How much he had been through I could only guess at... A second later, I was asleep...'*

– I find it very moving that his concern is for Simon. *'...How much he had been through, I could only guess at...'* – that's Joe talking of Simon.

And that, in a way, is the end of their adventure... I mean, more happens, but what I find significant is that he talks, in this book, about *writing* this book, and he says that he wrote it because Simon came in for a lot of criticism from the mountaineering community – from mutual friends – for abandoning Joe; for cutting the rope and then abandoning him.

And Joe wrote this book to tell the story, and to stop the criticism – to show to people that actually Simon did what any sensible mountaineer should have done in that situation. It is dedicated: *'To Simon Yates: for a debt I can never repay'*.

And what Joe says is that it was *writing the book* that changed his life. Actually, after all this adventure, his life didn't seem to significantly change – but he wrote this book, and it has changed his life. And he says that he feels incredibly fortunate for what happened. He is now a successful writer and author, a public speaker... he could never have imagined it. He's on a winning streak. And he actually says that perhaps what he had to endure was a small price to pay for such an inspiring adventure! Almost losing everything in Peru was a sensation quite as life-enhancing as winning.

So, that's something incredible. And the reflection I had was that actually, when he started to think about Simon and to thank him, and then to write the book and to reflect on this whole episode, *that* is when I think the maturing process was complete. He seems to me to have completed something in that maturing. It had to involve other people; it had to involve an altruistic, outward-going dimension for other people. And I think that's what heroism in Buddhism is about. It has to involve – well – the Bodhisattva ideal. (If you don't know about the Bodhisattva ideal, you'll have to ask!) But that is what is the heroic ideal in Buddhism. And Sangharakshita's – Bhante's – life is a sort of living example of the Bodhisattva ideal in action. His life, and his work, are the reason why we are here today. His work has touched the lives of thousands of people. It has affected us all, to some degree or another.

I thought I'd end with Einstein again, talking about the Bodhisattva ideal (although he doesn't use those terms):

*'A human being is part of the whole, called by us Universe. A part limited in time and space, he experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest; a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of Nature, in all its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation, and the foundation for inner security.'*