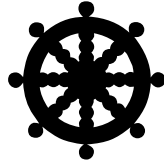


The Eightfold Path – East and West

Talk given at the Mahabodhi Society, Bodh Gaya, 28.12.2000



Many thanks, Venerable Sir, for your introduction, and your invitation to speak this afternoon. I am extremely honoured that you have asked me to give an address on the Dharma in this, of all places.

For as I hardly need remind any of you, it is here, in this auspicious place, where the Buddha actually entered nirvana and discovered the way to enlightenment. After his enlightenment, it is said that he spent some time in this area under the Bodhi tree, and under various other trees. He is said, in part, to have been pondering a rather big decision: was he actually going to teach the Dharma, to make the Way to enlightenment available for others? You get the impression from the scriptures that this really was a difficult, involved consideration. There is the well-known episode – the story or the myth – of Brahma Sahampati. The great Brahma of 1000 Worlds appeared to the Buddha in a vision, and begged him to reveal the Truth to the world. At that point, apparently, the Buddha had more or less decided against all that.

Well, as we know, other people can almost incredibly difficult. It is so very easy to misunderstand, or to think that you do understand, when you don't. Moreover, this Dharma was quite different from anything that had gone before. No one had ever taught it. Maybe no one would understand it, and he would be surrounded by bothersome people with all kinds of complicated misunderstandings and half understandings. What a life! No, it was better just to be enlightened, simply to enjoy, and pursue his Enlightenment.

However, as we all know, these thoughts didn't stay around for long. Prince Siddhartha had grown up with a sense of great responsibility. Everyone expected him to become king. Siddhartha's Going Forth was sparked off by reflection on humanity's sufferings. What moved him to enter into full time spiritual practice were the four sights – first an old man, a sick man, and a dead man, and then – a revelation – a wandering holy man. Why do people have to grow old, why do they always suffer and always die? What is really happening here, and can I do anything about it? As future king, is there anything that I can do? These were the thoughts of a highly trained, educated man in the prime of his youth. They were very idealistic, yet Siddhartha wasn't just a dreamer. He had been brought up to be strong, to act, to take responsibility – to take the leading part in society. Such an upbringing must have given him tremendous confidence. In these reflections, he found the confidence that he, Siddhartha, could actually do something about the sufferings of humanity; actually address the universal problems of death and impermanence. Of course, as a future king, as a good and wise king, he would want to help with material needs too – to help provide education, employment, justice, health and social welfare. However, the four sights had aroused deeper questions in his mind. What about age, impermanence, death? What about reality?

Whatever moved Siddhartha Gotama to act on *this* kind of consideration seems quite extraordinary. In Buddhist terminology, we would call it Bodhicitta, the embryonic aspiration for enlightenment. So, though it seems there took place something of a struggle in the Bodhisattva's mind, as indicated by Brahma Sahampati's request, it is hard to imagine that the Buddha could really have decided not to teach. Obviously, teaching was going to be difficult; obviously the rest of his life would be taken up

with communicating what he had achieved – but given his aspirations for others, he could hardly have done anything else.

In this way, the Buddha decided to teach the Dharma. The best people to start with, he felt, would be his five former companions. They were likely to understand. He knew them well; he knew they weren't too far away from the realisation he had gained. A few months before, they had all been ascetics, practising together. However, when he decided to stop ascetic practices, such as extreme fasting, and took some solid food, they were extremely disappointed, and left him. They weren't to know that taking that nourishment gave him the energy he needed to gain enlightenment.

The Buddha went to Sarnath, near Varanasi, to see them, and the Sutta describes the occasion like this ^[1].

Thus I have heard: on one occasion the Blessed One was staying at Varanasi in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There he addressed the group of five monks:

(Of course they wouldn't be literally monks like the monks here – they'd be dressed in dirty rags. They probably looked very wild, and very thin.)

"There are these two extremes that are not to be indulged in by one who has gone forth. Which two extremes? First, that which is devoted to sensual pleasure with reference to sensual objects: base, vulgar, common, ignoble, unprofitable. Second, that which is devoted to self-affliction: painful, ignoble, unprofitable. Avoiding both of these extremes, the middle way realized by the Tathagata – producing vision, producing knowledge – leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to liberation.

So the Buddha at once raises the issue that had divided them a few months before: that of ascetic practice or self-mortification. In the previous six years, he had been the most famous ascetic in the whole of India. He had wanted to explore thoroughly, beyond any shadow of doubt, whether or not the intense inhibition of the natural functions of the physical body offers a way to transcend suffering and impermanence. On finding that it does not, he stopped. Self-mortification, he now says, is an extreme practice that should be abandoned. Well, you have to admit, it is painful. Furthermore, it is ignoble, ugly, and inhuman. Crucially, it brings no spiritual benefit.

The opposite extreme is self-indulgence, something the five ascetics knew all about, just as everyone does. Disgust with self-indulgence was the cause of their asceticism in the first place. Their mistake had not been in going against self-indulgence, but in reacting to the opposite extreme. The Buddha's reaction had perhaps been even more extreme. He probably had more experience of sense pleasure than anyone in the world. The young Siddhartha had had it all, every imaginable pleasurable opportunity. So in his going forth Siddhartha had been, you could say, from one extreme to another, before he discovered his Middle Way.

The Sutta goes on to ask:

And what is the middle way realized by the Tathagata that – producing vision, producing knowledge – leads to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to liberation?

Precisely this Noble Eightfold Path: Right View, Right Intention, | Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, | Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration. This is the middle way realized by the Tathagata.

Firstly, the Buddha teaches Right View. We always have some kind of view, some kind of assumption, some kind of hypothesis about what is happening. We have to – we can't function otherwise. To function in the ordinary world, we have to assume we know who we are and what the world is, even though we don't really have a clue. We usually assume that we are a clearly defined person – whatever that is – living in a clearly defined world – whatever that might be. We may possibly assume that when we die we will go back to some kind of unchanging essence, or we may assume that when we die, that's

it, that's the end. We may believe that some kinds of actions are better than others are, or we may think they're all the same, or we may have our own special theory, or we may just never think about it. We may or many not consider that our actions will have consequences for our future.

Most of these attitudes about life and values – most of these *ditthis*, as they are called – are unconscious, and essentially, they are wrong: they are narrow and incomplete. We don't really know anything about the ultimate nature of things. We don't know anything about who we are. We are like a blind man groping along with a stick, forced to guess what might be in front of us, forced to guess what is happening around us. The development of Right View is the antidote to this spiritual ignorance. We need to understand that our actions have consequences; we need to learn about karma, and learn about the value of ethics. We need to learn about the Four Noble Truths. We need to learn about the whole path, the whole eightfold path. In doing so, we perfect, we Righten, we clarify our View. And over the course of our lives, as we put these teachings into practice, our understanding matures, eventually, into that perfection of Right View which even transcends all views. This is when the path really begins, when the mundane Eightfold Path becomes the Aryan or the Noble Eightfold Path, trodden by those who have attained some degree of insight and liberation.

Perhaps at this stage it's worth pointing out that the path is not literally something to be followed. It is really something to be embodied. In English, 'Noble Eightfold Path' translates the Pali *ariya atthangika magga*, and the word *atthangika* means having eight limbs. The word *anga* doesn't mean a stage. It means the limb of a body, like an arm or a leg. It isn't as though there is this path which has eight stages, and you follow these one by one. The image is more like that of a growing person, with growing limbs. It is rather like some of these Tibetan images of enlightened beings with many arms, say like the eight-armed form of Avalokitesvara or Chenrezig, the beautiful white Bodhisattva of Compassion. The path is us. It is not literally a thing out there that we follow; it is not a line that we tread. It is our own being. Actually, we already have the limbs, all eight of them; they just need lots of exercise.

The second of these limbs of the Eightfold Path is Right Intention or Motivation.

There are sure to be many, many reasons why we are here in Bodh Gaya this afternoon. I am a newcomer, a new boy in this most complex situation, so I cannot be expected to fathom your motivations for being here. Yet, I can be sure that they are there. It was central to the Buddha's realisation under the Bodhi tree, that every event is underlain by an infinite multitude of causes and conditions. There is no single cause for any phenomenon. Yet life isn't just a random chaos: every phenomenon arises from *particular* conditions.

As Buddhist practitioners, the question 'why' is an important part of our practice. From time to time, we need to become aware of the motive behind what we do. Times have changed. Our circumstances have changed. We ourselves have changed. At the beginning, our motivation can be very clear, very pure. Nevertheless, over the months and years, it can become diffused by all kinds of secondary issues, all kinds of distractions, desires, delusions, and aversions. In the end, our motive may become complex, mixed, and confused.

It can also work the other way. Yes, at the start of our Buddhist practice, our motivation may be a little vague. Nevertheless, as we get more involved, it clarifies. Perhaps, for example, in the beginning, our motivation was even quite unskilful – maybe we thought that through meditation we were going to gain special powers, special advantages over others. On the other hand, maybe we wanted to be seen to be virtuous; perhaps we felt socially insecure and wanted others to give us special respect. These motivations can be unconscious, and most of us have unclear motives in the beginning. It can hardly be otherwise, when we have no real experience. However, as we experience more through practice, our motivation clarifies. So again – we have the limb, we have the organ, – we just need to work to refine our current motives into Right and Perfect Motive.

How are we to do this? We need to experience, more closely, what it is that actually moves us. This is the Buddhist method – to experience things as they are. Our experience can be divided into two parts,

known as *rupa*, and *nama*. There is that which we experience as physical, and there is that which we would call mental. The physical side of life is relatively simple and straightforward. The mental side is perhaps not so tangible, but if we look, we see four aspects. First, there is our consciousness. Through our senses, we become conscious of objects – many, many, different objects – in every moment. Through your ears, for example, you are hearing the words I am speaking to you now. Each one of these words is an object. The second mental aspect of our experience is some kind of recognition of each object. This all happens at an unbelievable speed. You recognise each sound as a ‘word’, even if you can’t understand my English. The third aspect is that there is some kind of feeling coming along with the object. I hope you experience my words as pleasant, yet you may possibly find some of them painful. On the other hand, you may have no particularly strong feeling either way. Nevertheless, there is a feeling quality there. Everything that appears in our experience has some feeling quality.

The fourth mental aspect is where our motivation kicks in. There is always some kind of willed, emotional response to any feeling. If an experience is pleasant, we will respond in certain ways. We will probably *want* to repeat it. If it is unpleasant, we will definitely not want to repeat it. Either way, there arises something that we want, or something that we don't want: a wish, of some kind, arises. Some kind of volition, or will, however subtle, comes into operation whenever we experience feelings. There's a cyclical process going on here continuously: object, feeling, and volitional response. It's happening now. We have arrived here with a physical body, and with senses. Through these senses, we become conscious of all the millions of objects that make up our personal world. These objects cause various pleasures, and pains. Moreover, we can hardly help responding to these feelings. We are continually forming wishes about them, wanting to repeat what felt pleasant, and wanting to avoid what felt unpleasant.

The process of willing and wishing has no beginning or end that can be perceived. It is the heart of the process of unenlightened existence that Buddhism calls *samsara*. As we want, so we do. We act in accordance with our desires. Like a potter shaping a clay pot on a wheel, our wishes and responses form the shape of our lives. As we respond, so we develop the habit of responding in that kind of way. By developing particular habits, we become a particular kind of person.

In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha speaks of the way a large jar gradually fills with water, drop by drop. Each drop is tiny, but still, by these tiny degrees, eventually, the whole jar is filled. “*By oneself is evil done; by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone; by oneself is one made pure. Purity and impurity depend on oneself; no one can purify another.*”

Buddhist practice *relies* on the fact that we can shape our lives. We are responsible. Our lives are not pre-ordained by some external force. We are not living out some fixed destiny. Our present experience has certainly been conditioned by choices made in our past, but our future experience will be conditioned by the way we respond now. The central point is that to some extent, we can choose how we respond. The choice may be limited, but it is always there.

This, in a nutshell, is the essence of the Buddha's Eightfold Path in its active aspect of self-transformation. We can learn to change the way we respond, learn to respond in ways that bring happiness and liberation. Buddhism teaches five central ethical principles or precepts, which provide excellent guidelines for this kind of learning. These are the basis for all other precepts in all Buddhist traditions.

Instead of harming others and ourselves through our responses, we can learn to help them, and to help ourselves, too. We learn by noticing the impulses to act, or speak, or think, in ways that cause harm, and by changing them into helpful ones. That's the first precept.

Then we notice our temptations to take what does not belong to us – whether it is others' material goods, or simply their precious time and energy. Through this, we learn how to give, to be generous. This is the second precept.

Then, we notice our tendency to harm others and ourselves through our sexual cravings. This is difficult to deal with, perhaps, but even here, it is possible to change. Over the years, we can learn to become a little more simple and content in this area. This is the third precept.

Then, we notice how often we distort the objective truth, how we exaggerate, dress things up, minimise, play things down when we want to give a certain impression – how we don't seem to be able to help spinning a subtle web of illusion, keeping up a particular image. We are all under pressure to conform to others' expectations in our social expectations and relationships – so although this seems rather straightforward, in fact it is surprisingly difficult to be truthful in our speech to others and even in our reflections to ourselves. Hence, truthfulness is the fourth precept.

Finally, we notice how all this awareness can get rather too much, and how we like to get away from ourselves from time to time. We like to get intoxicated in some way or another. With some people, it is drink or drugs, which of course can lead to serious difficulties. Nevertheless, there are other ways, too. Some people like to get on their favourite verbal hobbyhorse, and just rant and rave at whoever will listen. That's their favourite form of intoxication. Others like to close down, cut off for a few hours, and inhabit the latest computer game or video. In subtle ways, I think we all have our little escape routes from reality. Traditionally this fifth precept entails abstention from intoxicating substances, but it can be said in principle to extend to any activity that impairs our mindfulness. The positive counterpart is mindfulness, the development of awareness.

Especially, I may say – just to remind you of what I've called the heart of the Eightfold Path – the fifth precept is the development of awareness of our moment-by-moment responses. Here I am speaking of awareness not just in the sense of objective seeing, as though in a mirror. I mean it in the sense of *apramada*, the ethical awareness, or sensitivity, which continually seeks out insight and positive change. This ethical sensitivity is of the essence of Right Action.

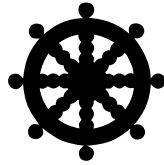
In terms of the rest of the Eightfold Path, this awareness operates in the field of our communication with others, and in the way that we earn our livelihood. In that awareness, we have the pivot of the practice of Right Speech and Right Livelihood.

It is also of the essence of Right Effort. That is, the effort to maintain whatever skilful attitudes we already have, and to create fresh skilful attitudes. It is the effort to get rid of our existing unskilful attitudes, and to prevent new unskilful attitudes from arising.

In terms of Right Mindfulness, this awareness, which continually seeks out insight and positive change, is in itself Right Mindfulness.

It is also of the essence of Right Samadhi, in which this activity of developing skilful attitudes is continued into the sphere of direct spiritual practice, working on the mind directly in meditation.

In one short talk like this, I can only briefly summarise the Eightfold Path. However, if you remember that its essential principle is to work on the cultivation of Right View and Right Motivation, you have the crux of the whole thing. If those *angas* of the path are fully alive, then everything else follows. One's *shila* or ethics, in terms of one's speech, action generally, and particular livelihood, will be transformed. *Samadhi* or higher consciousness will be developed, through a deeper engagement with mindfulness, a deeper appreciation of the need to exercise effort in developing positive mental states, and the continuation of that effort into one's meditation practices. That more thoroughgoing engagement in meditation will result in the development of some degree of dhyana or higher consciousness. Such clarity and tranquillity of mind enables one, through insight meditation, to turn right view and right motivation into perfect vision and perfect motivation – into wisdom and compassion.



Let me say a few words now about how some people practice this path, both in the East and in the West. In the Western Buddhist Order (as it is known in the West), and in the Trilokya Bauddha Mahasangha (as it is known in India), we have been engaged, not only in practising the Eightfold Path, but also in developing a new kind of Buddhist movement. The movement was started by Urgyen Sangharakshita, an Englishman who came to India as a conscript in the British Army and stayed on after the war. He spent two years as a homeless sadhu, before becoming ordained as a monk in the Theravada tradition. He was eventually sent by his teacher to Kalimpong, where he had a great deal of contact with Tibetan Buddhist teachers and lamas. In Kalimpong, he established an interdenominational Buddhist centre known as the Triyana Vardhana Vihara. He was also active in India. For fourteen years, he was Editor of the Journal of the Maha Bodhi Society; he also wrote *Flame in Darkness*, the biography of its extraordinary founder, Anagarika Dharmapala, perhaps the first Buddhist teacher to foster dialogue between different Buddhist traditions. Dharmapala of course saved the Mahabodhi Temple here over many years of struggle with the authorities of the time, and made it available for Buddhist pilgrims.

Through his Triyana centre in Kalimpong, many of Sangharakshita's activities were designed to encourage dialogue between different Buddhist traditions. One of his main teachers, Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche, who died in 1959, was also deeply concerned with unity amongst the Tibetan schools. Sangharakshita's main work, *A Survey of Buddhism*, argues in detail for the unity of Buddhism.

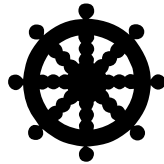
The Western Buddhist Order, which Sangharakshita founded in 1967, very much inherits this ecumenical approach. The Western Buddhist Order does not identify itself with any one form of Buddhism. Instead, it appreciates the riches of the whole Buddhist tradition and seeks to draw from those riches whatever is of value for its own practice of the Dharma.

Individual members of the WBO go for Refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and undertake to observe ten ethical precepts. They consider the Going for Refuge to be the crucial aspect of Buddhist practice. This means that they take the Buddha as their example, undertake to practice his teaching for the sake of enlightenment for the benefit of all, and in harmony with their teachers and co-practitioners. The way Order members choose to live this commitment out in practice is seen as important, though secondary to the going for Refuge itself. Some live more as monks or nuns, others as laymen or laywomen. Nevertheless, all have ordination, which entails a serious standard of commitment. As members of the Order, men and women are equals. Both receive the same ordination, engage in the same spiritual practices, and assume the same organisational responsibilities.

The title 'Western Buddhist Order' seems increasingly anachronistic, since we have many centres and activities in the east – particularly in India, where roughly a third of all activities take place. We are therefore planning a change in our name to reflect this. For many years now, we have not been merely a 'western' Order. I believe there are currently around nine hundred Order members worldwide. I'm guessing, but as a rough estimate, for each Order Member there are perhaps thirty or so others. These may simply be practising the Dharma and attending a local Buddhist centre, or training for ordination – a process that usually takes from three to five years. There is thus a variety of lifestyles, even though all are pursuing the path to Enlightenment. As well as running meditation classes at the centre, conducting Dharma study, giving talks, and performing pujas, many Dharmacharis (as the male of the species is known) and Dharmacharinis (female) live in communities and work in some form of Right Livelihood businesses. Not all of them do so, of course: many have an ordinary job. A few Order members live

quite solitary lives.

In India most of our businesses have to do with social welfare – we run nurseries, junior schools, hostels for students, and medical centres. These are particularly in Maharashtra, but there are also major projects in other states. Much of this takes place in conjunction with our charity, Karuna Trust, which helps numerous projects in India, as well as the Indo-Tibetan school in Kalimpong. In Europe and other western countries such as USA, there are Right Livelihood restaurants, food shops and various manufacturing enterprises. Many of these operate on a small scale, though in the UK, we have a particularly successful craft retailing business with a chain of thirty or so high street shops ^[2]. These enterprises not only provide funding for Dharma projects, but also offer workers a Buddhist context for their practice. Some Order members specialise in Right Livelihood, others in teaching or meditation. Some work with those seeking ordination. Others concentrate on bringing up their family. It is rather difficult to tell in a few words much about our movement, so if you'd like to know more, I suggest you raise it in the question time after my talk, or speak to one of the other Order members present.



It is often said of our society that material values have become strong at a time when spiritual values have declined. However, the decline is not particularly due to materialism. A far more important reason is that for centuries in western society there has been increasing criticism of religion that is practised merely externally. This great social current has led, in one way or another, to what Nietzsche called 'the death of God'. This has seeded a general feeling that religious matters are an open question in need of exploration. This definitely does not amount to a lack of interest in spiritual life. 2500 years after the Buddha, people are still looking for answers to the same questions. What is the value of life when everyone gets old, and sick, and dies? How can we come to terms with impermanence and the disappointment it causes? What is the point of life? Does it have one? Buddhism addresses these questions, and says, most emphatically, that it does.

The westerners who pass through a place like Bodh Gaya, with their strange looks and their strange ways, have often been touched by the four sights. Often they, too, have seen, with their spiritual eye, a dead man and a holy man. Like Siddhartha Gautama, they too have wondered what can be done about reality. Maybe, like him, they can find the confidence really to practice, and to embody, the truths that the Buddha discovered.

I certainly hope they will find that confidence here. I am sure we would all want that those coming Bodh Gaya should find the Dharma. Of course, western travellers will certainly find *Buddhism*; however, Buddhism, as an institution, is something a little different. As far as Buddhism goes, a pilgrim can hardly avoid it, – we have an ice cream parlour of Buddhism here, there are so many different colours and flavours. I sometimes fear that newcomers may find the variety rather confusing.

Anyway, over the next decade, Bodh Gaya seems set to amass quite possibly the largest collection of Buddhist groups in the world. The site of the Buddha's enlightenment is the definitive place of pilgrimage. One can visit the places where he was born, taught, lived, and died, but only his enlightenment defines him as Buddha.

The thirty-four Buddhist establishments currently in residence is a mere handful compared to the potential number. The growth of Buddhist groups is, of course, a worldwide phenomenon. I believe that

certain cities in the west, particularly in the USA, are host to considerably more than thirty-four Buddhist centres. This proximity is unprecedented. Until now, contact between different Buddhist traditions was limited. Until the last century, there was little likelihood for a tradition even to come to know about Buddhism being practised elsewhere. It was the increase in global communication over the 20th century that made the different Buddhist traditions aware of one another. Now the information is everywhere, and they can find out as much as they want.

Yet, just as it is with individual human beings, there are limits to our curiosity about each other. Most Buddhist groups are struggling to preserve their identity in a very fast changing world. In the East, overall, the institutions of Buddhism are in decline. As far as I know, there are no exceptions. Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese Buddhism have suffered greatly. A thousand years ago, the Dharma was virtually wiped out in India (though in modern times it has been revived, spectacularly, under Dr. Ambedkar). In Mongolia and in Russia, Buddhism almost disappeared under communism; in China, it is hugely depleted; and there is of course Tibet, the most tragic case of all. Yet, Tibet is not the only tragic loss, by any means. The forces of industrialisation and secularisation threaten all forms of ethnic Buddhism, all the way from Japan and Korea to Burma and Thailand.

These forces have caused most ethnic Buddhist traditions to proclaim themselves to the rest of the world. It is now important, and perhaps in some cases even a matter of survival, that they establish an identity in an international market place. There, living in close proximity in the cities of the world, they will inevitably interact with other groups.

This amounts to a most interesting situation. There is an inevitable tension between the need for each Buddhist group to preserve its identity, and the need for it to be open to the influence of other Buddhists. Dialogue between certain groups has, of course, been happening for years, but it will continue, and out of it will emerge both constructive criticism and new appreciation. I think it will be real dialogue, not just intellectual discussion, polemical debate, or a diplomatic exercise. It is the characteristic of dialogue that the parties concerned simply share themselves without any particular agenda. They are not trying to have an interesting discussion for its own sake; they are not trying to win a debate; they are not merely being diplomatic. Indeed, they are not assuming that they are going to get anything particular from the dialogue, except the possibility of continuing it. What is gained from continuing dialogue is a connection, where previously there was disconnection. I personally hope that out of the dialogue between the different Buddhist traditions will come an increased realisation of what we have in common. I also believe that the long-term survival of Buddhism, as a world religion, may depend on this.

Without dialogue, we could possibly end up with an ever-increasing profusion of tiny Buddhist sects with nothing but diplomacy between them. Society generally is tending increasingly to isolate the individual. I don't think this is an entirely good thing, but it is happening everywhere and we have to meet it. Our increased isolation arises from our greater freedom, mobility, prosperity, and globalised knowledge. There will always be people who feel they are Buddhist because they are born into a Buddhist country or a Buddhist family, but nowadays such people increasingly feel free *not* to be a Buddhist, even when they are born into a Buddhist environment. Increasingly, people want to make up their own minds about these things. They want to have a choice. Well, there is certainly a choice of Buddhist traditions.

The main drawback to having such a vast menu is that it allows everyone whimsically to pick and choose, if they want, for the rest of their lives. Maybe that is better than having no choice. However, to use the metaphor in the White Lotus Sutra, if I were trapped in a burning house, I would simply like to know a way out. In the midst of the flames, I would not like someone to present me with thirty alternatives. Well, Kamalashila, you can get out this way, if you like; but *that* way is also good, and actually there are a couple of dozen other ways. Which do you want? Faced with so much choice, I might become confused. I might wonder if all the escape routes were all as effective as one another.

Even when I'd chosen one, I might have an uneasy doubt about my choice, which might cause me to follow the instructions in a half-hearted sort of way. Then I might make a mistake, lose my way, and be burned up in the burning house. Oh dear!

That's the problem with choice.

We need to clarify *why* we want particular things. We need to cultivate right View in order to clarify our right Motive, and vice versa.

The parable of the Burning House appears in the White Lotus Sutra, known as the *Saddharma Pundarika* or Lotus Flower of the True Dharma. The Burning House of course represents samsara, the endless cycle of ignorant responses, in which we trap ourselves through our fixed, habitual ways. The house symbolises the samsaric process that I described in the context of Right View and Right motivation. It is THE WORLD. It is described in the Sutra as a huge, neglected, run down, sort of place, very old and dilapidated, rather like a huge ancient palace that has not been lived in for a hundred years. It is full of dust, owls, foxes and ghosts; and now – someone has set it alight. Probably, it was one of us, because we, the unenlightened ignorant beings trapped in the house, are just little children, and we're just playing happily away. We are just having fun with matches. We have no idea that the house is actually on fire. In fact we don't even know what 'fire' means. We have no idea at all. So even though our kind father shouts to us, in tones of great urgency, that the house is on fire and we should quickly get out, we just look at him briefly, then we laugh and run about playing, just as before.

The father is of course the Buddha, who understands what samsara really is, who understands what the house is, and who certainly understands what fire is. Yet what is he to do? He loves his children, so he also knows his children: he knows their mentality. He realises he can use a trick to get them out. He says – "Hey, boys and girls! It's present time! Look, I've got all kinds of presents for you! They're just outside the front door! I've got each of you a special cart to play with! I've got you these great big carts, I've got you these nice medium size carts, and I've got these super cool mini carts. They are here right now, so come and get them!" Immediately, all the children run out of the house and are saved from the flames. However, when they get outside, and the father closes the door with some relief, the children don't actually find the promised *variety* of carts. The carts are there, but each one of them is a huge, beautiful cart. What a tricky Buddha! The Sutra doesn't actually say that any of the children were disappointed – but certainly, once outside, there is no choice. Each of them gets what is called the Great Vehicle, the Vehicle of Enlightenment that the Sutra calls the Mahayana.

So there are a couple of points here. First, the Buddha does present the children with a choice – a choice cleverly designed to get their imaginations working. He knows that some children feel they would like a special, fancy little cart. Others simply see themselves on something regular, reliable, proper, and normal. Others, again, like the idea of something big and grand. Yet, when they get out, each child gets the same. They all get the big one, and they are all perfectly happy with that.

So maybe after all there is some advantage in our presenting such a variety of Buddhisms. Some forms of Buddhism seem attractive because they are clever, neat, special; others seem reassuringly austere, simple, proper, without frills; others, again, seem transcendent, grand, and sublime. Yet actually, in reality, they are *all* transcendent, grand, and sublime.

Bodh Gaya, as it expands to include more Buddhist groups, and attracts increasing numbers of Buddhists worldwide, could well be very suitable as a location for inter-Buddhist dialogue. I don't have the impression there has been enough so far. It is still quite easy for a teacher to give the message that his or her own form of Buddhism is the most authentic, the most effective, and the most orthodox. It is a very easy hint to make to an impressible young westerner. I have certainly done it myself, out of positive pride in my own tradition. I even think it's understandable: it is surely very positive that one loves and appreciates one's own way of training, and even secretly believes it to be the best. However, in the end we have to recognise that this is only our feeling. All we can really teach is our experience. We should therefore try to rise above sectarianism, and learn to understand each other. I have read that ancient

Indian monasteries like Nalanda were very tolerant places where monks from different traditions often lived and practised together. Here at the Mahabodhi Temple, I'm told that there have sometimes been collective pujas attended by different traditions. I think that is a very good sign.

Dharmic authenticity, effectiveness, and orthodoxy can only come from practice and experience of the Dharma. Enlightenment is the only real criterion for orthodoxy, even though it may be hard to apply it. Buddhists aim simply to develop insight leading to Enlightenment. All schools practise the Eightfold Path. All of us go for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. These fundamental principles cut through all our differences. Therefore, in our relations with one another, we need to see our differences as superficial. Many differences arise purely out of historical circumstances. Many differences come from our cultural or ethnic background.

We could learn to understand these differences better. At the same time, it is worth acknowledging that some differences are important, in various ways. Variants exist, between some groups, in the interpretation of doctrine. These can be interesting and even illuminating. For example, some groups differ in the way they understand the process of karma and its result. Some believe that everything that happens to us is the *direct* result of some action done previously. Others say that there are other kinds of causation as well as karmic ones. Many believe that the *dhyanas*, states of harmonious concentration developed in meditation, are unnecessary for developing insight into reality. Some assert that the Buddha's teaching of *dhyana* in the Pali Suttas is a later interpolation influenced by Hinduism. Some believe that certain doctrines should be taken literally; others say they are a matter of interpretation. Some groups heartily disapprove of ritual; others lay great emphasis on ritual. Some do little or no Dharma study; others emphasise it more than anything else.

I think all these differences are relatively unimportant, because they don't prevent anyone from practising and changing themselves. Yet, if such questions were approached in a spirit of dialogue, it might help us all to consider them afresh, and even to think more deeply about them. After all, they are of very great interest. Moreover, the point of dialogue is not to win, but to understand our own minds. The standard of understanding and practice of the Dharma that exists between us is surely more important than any temporary, sectarian, consideration.

In understanding the Dharma as it has come down to us, I believe that it is necessary to use both common sense and imagination. For example, I met someone recently who told me he'd been disappointed in doing a particular *sadhana* – a visualisation meditation focusing on a particular Buddha-form. The text of the *sadhana* had promised that if he did a certain (very large) number of mantras, he would gain a perfect memory. He took this completely literally, and chanted all those millions of mantras. Unfortunately, he assured me that his memory is still imperfect! It seemed to me that even so, he had presumably benefited from the practice, but he wasn't so sure. He had taken the statement in the *sadhana* literally, when it was probably intended in a less defined sort of way.

I think that we can isolate the tendency to literalism as something of an obstacle to dialogue within Buddhism. Literalism means taking words at their face value instead of recognising their metaphorical resonance. You would have thought that Buddhists, more than any other religious practitioners, should know that all language is metaphorical. We have our scriptures like the Perfection of Wisdom, based on clear precedents in the Pali Canon ^[3]; the Dharma is full of ideas that are intended to cut away at our literal-mindedness. How literally are we to take certain statements in the Mahayana or the Pali Canon? For example, in Chapter 21 of the Dhammapada are the words, '*Having slain mother, father, two brahmin kings, and a tiger as the fifth, (happy) goes the holy man.*' ^[4] This really cannot be taken literally. But some people find what we could call the poetic aspect of the Dharma very difficult to understand. Sangharakshita tells the story of friends who were quite upset by a line in Shantideva's sevenfold puja, which is chanted in worship to the Buddha. The line goes: '*I offer (the Buddha) lamps, encrusted with jewels, festooned with golden lotus*'. It was upsetting because the lamps on the shrine did

not actually *have* any jewels encrusted upon them. Nor were any golden lotuses visible – so they felt this was an infringement of the precept against false speech. They could not see the inspirational value of imagining these offerings. They could not see that truth can be metaphorical as well as literal.

Literalism happens when we stop trying to understand, when we think we know, and start going through the motions. It is characteristic of merely external religion. But Buddhist practice is all about developing the ability to think and see afresh. It is important that we try always to see the principle and the spirit behind the literal word-meaning. The Eightfold Path, as we have seen, is not literally a path. The notion of a path is a metaphor for something much more meaningful, something that is ultimately altogether beyond words.

Just to conclude on this note, here is a passage from a hymn to the Perfection of Wisdom, from the

Prajnaparamita Sutra in 8,000 lines ^[5]. Speaking to the Buddha, Shariputra is praising Perfect Wisdom in the form of a goddess. Now ask yourselves, as I read: is there literally a goddess called Prajnaparamita? I'm not saying there isn't; I'm not saying there is. Please simply relish the Sutra's metaphorical, non-literal meaning.

The Perfection of Wisdom gives light, O Lord. I pay homage to the Perfection of Wisdom. She is worthy of homage. She is unstained. The entire world cannot stain her. She is a source of light, and from everyone in the triple world she removes darkness. And she leads away from the blinding darkness caused by the defilements and by wrong views. In her we can find shelter. Most excellent are her works. She makes us seek the safety of the wings of Enlightenment. She brings light to the blind. She brings light so that all fear and distress may be forsaken. She has gained the five eyes, and she shows the path to all beings. She herself is an organ of vision. She disperses the gloom and darkness of delusion. She does nothing about all dharmas. She guides to the path those who have strayed onto a bad road. She is identical with all knowledge.

She never produces any dharma because she forsakes the residues relating to both kinds of coverings, those produced by defilements and those produced by the cognizable.

She does not stop any dharma. Herself unstopped and unproduced is the Perfection of Wisdom. She is the mother of the Bodhisattvas on account of the emptiness of own-marks. As the donor of the jewel of all the Buddha Dharmas, she brings about the ten powers of a Buddha. She cannot be crushed. She protects the unprotected, with the help of the four grounds of self-confidence. She is the antidote to birth and death. She has a clear knowledge of the own-being of all dharmas, for she does not stray away from it. The Perfection of Wisdom of the Buddhas, the Lords, sets in motion the Wheel of the Dharma.'

The Wheel of the Dharma is the teaching of the Path, the Noble Eightfold Path, which is not literally a path, or a wheel. It is inconceivable, beyond words, beyond any designation. It is a great vehicle, a majestic and sublime vehicle for gaining perfect Enlightenment. Moreover, we are not separate from this vehicle. We ourselves are beyond words, beyond conceivability. Human beings are not what they seem, for they have the potential for gaining the great Enlightenment that Siddhartha gained here, beneath the Bodhi Tree.

[1] DhammachakkappavattanaSutta, Thanissaro's translation (slight modification).

[2] Windhorse Trading, based in Cambridge, UK: follow links from www.fwbo.com

[3] E.g. Sutta Nipata. See L. Gomez, 'Proto-Madhyamika in the Pali Canon' in Philosophy East and

West 26 (2), pp.137-65.

[4] Buddharakkhita's translation, modified.

[5] Dr. Conze's translation.